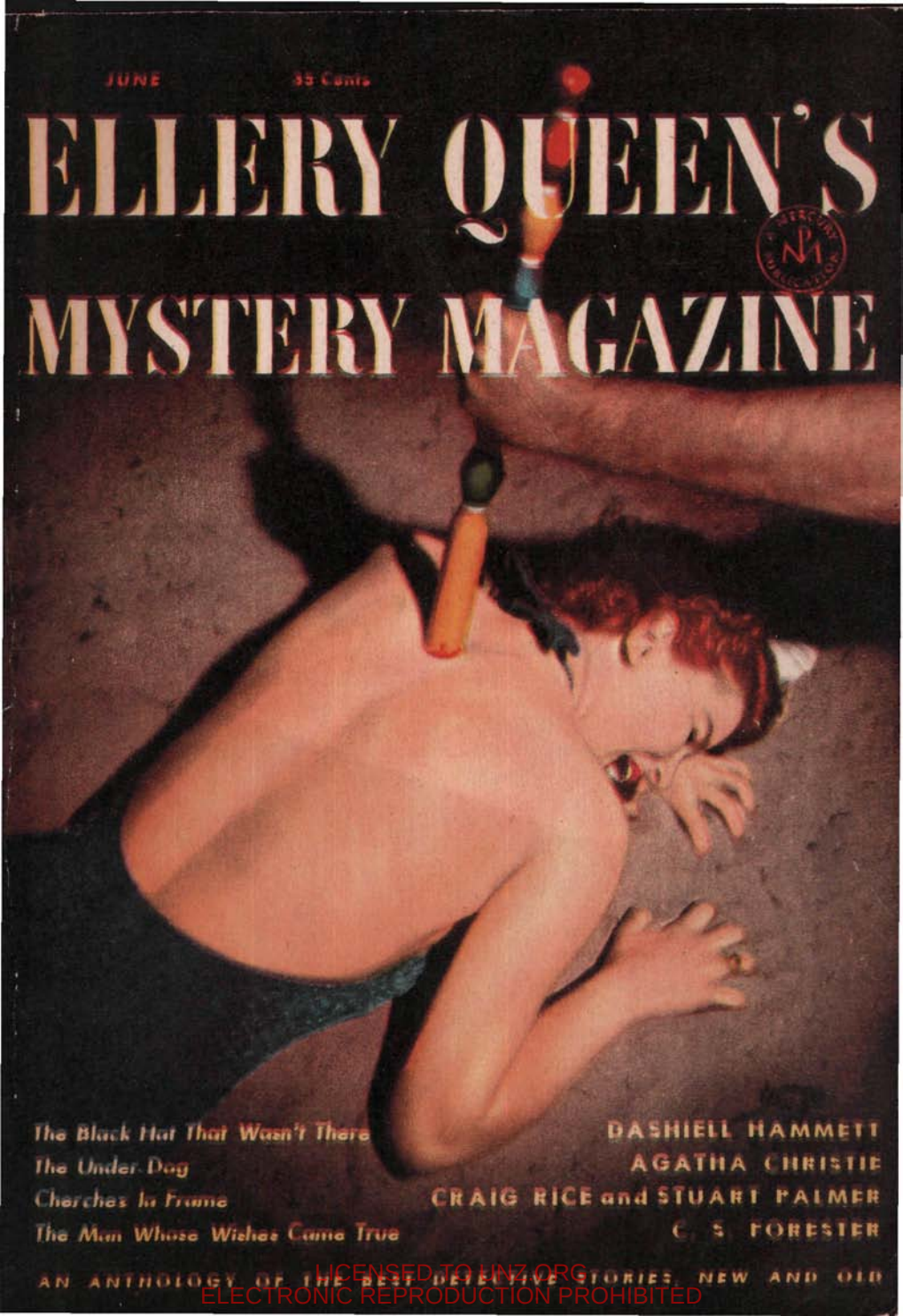

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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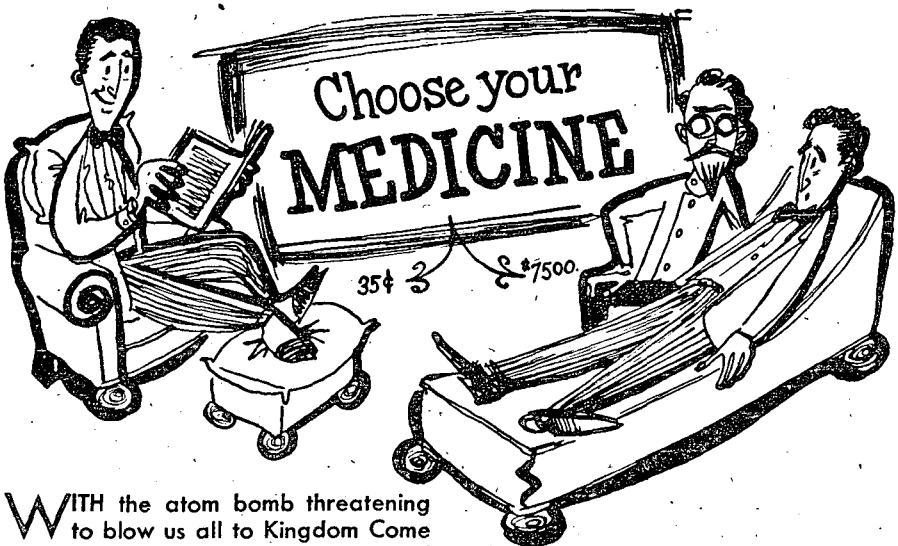

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WINNERS OF A SECOND PRIZE: CRAIG RICE & STUART PALMER

JOHN J. MALONE

Most people accept the well-known aphorism that "history repeats itself," and even more people accept the dictum that "lightning does not strike twice in the same place." Craig Rice and Stuart Palmer, by the simple process of tapping typewriter keys, have proved the historical axiom and, simultaneously, disproved the electrical maxim. You will recall that for EQMM's Fifth Annual Contest, Craig Rice and Stuart Palmer combined their famous ferrets in a single story — and won a Second Prize. Last year, for EQMM's Sixth Annual Contest, they did a ditto — and again copped a Second Prize. Will history continue to repeat, will lightning strike thrice in the same place? In this instance, we can only share your hope that there will be no break in history, and that the Rice-Palmer brand of atmospheric electricity is literally of the chain variety . . .

The first Hildegarde Withers-John J. Malone manhunting-merger was originally titled "The Loco Motive," but appeared in EQMM as "Once Upon a Train." As "The Loco Motive," and even before we officially announced that the story had won a Second Prize, it was snapped up by MGM. But was it produced under either title? No, the story suffered a sea-change (or should we say, a C-change?) under the ever-loving care of the Hollywood masterminds. When the motion picture was finally released, lo and behold it bore the title of "Mrs. O'Malley and Mr. Malone." Not only did the plot, as first conceived by the Rice-Palmer sleuthing syndicate, get struck by lightning, but in the resultant criminological cloudburst one of the two chief characters got lost! Perhaps the lightning pulverized Hildegarde, and the winds caused by the movie adaptation blew her dust into nothingness. For, somehow, by some remarkable alchemy unknown to science, Miss Withers became Mrs. O'Malley, and, dear readers, it was no mere disguise or mysterious alias.

MISS WITHERS

And now what has happened to our lightning-struck authors? Again, before we had a chance to announce the prize-winning status of the second Withers-Malone imbroglio, MGM purchased the story — this time under the title, "Cherchez la

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Frame." And now we find ourselves in a ratiocinative race with MGM — to determine which will come first, our publication of the story or the second movie. For we have learned on good authority that the producer and the writer of the screenplay plan "to follow the original story much more closely."

Of course, we don't know just what that means. We'd be enormously surprised if the sequel to "Mrs. O'Malley and Mr. Malone" actually turned up on marquees as "Cherchez la Frame." Imagine that title in lights! Nor can we quite convince ourselves that Hildegarde will remain in dusty oblivion, or that Malone too may not go the way of all lightning flash.

Whatever the second picture is about, under whatever title it may appear, and no matter who is in it — Withers, O'Malley, Malone, or McTavish — here, for your detectival delectation, is the* original story, *precisely as Craig Rice and Stuart Palmer wrote it.*

CHERCHEZ LA FRAME

by CRAIG RICE & STUART PALMER

"DON'T LOOK at me in that tone of voice!" said John J. Malone firmly, as he emerged from the bedroom of his bungalow set among the palm gardens of the Beverlywood. His suit was by Finchley, shirt by Brooks Brothers, but his tie was out of this or any world.

Maggie hit a typewriter key savagely. "One week in California and you go Hollywood! Is she blonde, brunette, or redhead?"

"Name some other flavors. On second thought, don't bother. If you're talking about my cravat, it was a Christmas present from a feminine admirer."

"You must have it bad to actually *wear* a neon sunset like that!"

"It's from a lady I met on the train when I was mixed up in the Larsen case last year," the little lawyer admitted. "She's visiting out here now, and I asked her to meet me and go out to dinner tonight." He glimpsed himself in the mirror, and winced visibly. Then the phone rang, and Malone did a double-wince.

* Our prediction has already come true. In January 1951, MGM announced that the second picture would be called — *cherchez le chapeau* and run for your life! — "Up the Alley with Mrs. O'Malley"!!!

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Maggie made no move to answer it. "Probably Chicago again, for the fourth time today. *Mister* Joe Vastrelli, the guy who's paying for this junket, wants to know what if anything we've accomplished. Are you in or out?"

"Need you ask?" Malone gestured, dribbling cigar ashes over his lapel. "*Out!*"

But this time it was a girl on the line. When the little lawyer took the phone he heard, "Are you the Mr. Malone who's been phoning the Screen Actors' Guild and all around town trying to locate a Nina La-Costa?" The voice was silky. "Would you pay fifty dollars to know where she is right this minute?"

"Yes, my dear. Emphatically and without reservation, yes."

"Then listen. She's at Lucky's Place. That's a bar out at Canyon Cove, on the shore just north of Santa Monica. Got it?"

"Indelibly printed on my memory. But who are you, and how —?"

"Wait." She paused, and Malone could hear the door of the 'phone booth open, and in the distance a woman singing *Linda Mujer* to the accompaniment of a marimba band. Then the girl was back on the line, speaking cautiously. "My name's Alva —"

"Time's up!" cut in the operator. "Deposit fifteen cents for three minutes more."

"—and-I'll-come-tomorrow-to-get-my-dough," the girl finished all in one breath.

"Lucky's Bar," Maggie said coldly. "A saloon. That will be handy."

But Malone was already out of the door and plunging recklessly through the hotel's tulip beds, headed toward the sunset and a taxi. It was seven thirty on the nose when his dinner date arrived, an angular spinster of uncertain years who looked as if she had dressed hastily in the dark. "So I'm stood up!" sniffed Miss Hildegarde Withers.

"John J. Malone has stood up lots of people," Maggie told her wearily. She could have added that some of them were gorgeous, callipygous females as contrasted with this weather-beaten battleaxe, whose hat looked like an also-ran float in last year's Rose Bowl Parade.

"So disappointing," admitted the maiden schoolteacher. She had long held a sneaking admiration for the rakish little lawyer; besides, the man seemed to have a knack for stumbling into excitement and adventure. Her eyes brightened. "But of course, business before pleasure. Is Mr. Malone working on a murder case?"

Maggie shook her head, and went on to explain why they were here. It had begun on a dull afternoon in late January, with nothing in the mail except a reminder of overdue rent, when the phone call had come in from Mr. Joseph Vastrelli. Back in Chicago that name meant something. Time was when Vastrelli and his slightly less colorful brother Jim had borne a certain dubious repute, associated with slot machines and similar enterprises.

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But the Vastrellis had mellowed with the times. Now Joe was head of a combination of produce firms, eminently respectable, prominent in good works and civic betterment, and getting a toe-hold in Gold Coast society.

Maggie hadn't wanted Malone to obey the summons. But when the lawyer had arrived at the plush uptown apartment, he had been met with fine cognac, Uppman cigars, and a warm handshake instead of the brass-knucks he half expected. "Why should I be sore at you?" Vastrelli had boomed. "Sure you made a monkey out of me on the witness stand in that damage suit, but that was just because you are a smarter lawyer than my lawyers. I need the best and I can afford it. That's why I want you to carry out this very confidential mission for me."

And the big man let down his hair, unburdening himself of a story that proved him an arrant sentimentalist at heart. It had to do with his wife, Nina, the only woman he had ever loved. Malone was shown a photograph in a solid-gold frame of a Madonna-like girl with a Delilah mouth, built like a stack of wheats. Nina had walked out, without any explanation, twenty years ago. There had been rumors about her; she was supposed to have got a quickie Mexican divorce by mail; she had taken up briefly with an orange-rancher named Grimes or Gray. It was certain that she had starred in several silent movies under the name of Nina LaCosta, taking the name of the vaudeville actor who was her current inamorata. Vastrelli had seen those old films dozens of times — probably sitting in the back row, Malone thought, so nobody could see him crying.

Anyway, Nina had finally dropped out of sight — South America, someone said. Vastrelli had kept a light in the window, and her picture always in his bedroom. But he had heard nothing, until this year, when at Christmas he had received a card from her — signed, *Nina, remember?* — postmarked Beverly Hills, but with no return address. The bereft husband wanted Malone to locate her, to find out if she needed help. And, if she had at last broken with LaCosta, to see if she still might be the woman who could come back to Chicago and take her place beside him where she belonged.

"So Malone took the case," Maggie concluded. "He's a pushover for a sentimental story like that. I made him bring me along too — I hadn't had a vacation in four years, and I've always dreamed of seeing Hollywood. But I don't know why I'm telling you all this."

"You know very well why," said Miss Withers dryly. "You think Malone is getting into deep water, and you want an ally. Is it that you distrust Vastrelli?"

Maggie shook her head. "This Nina LaCosta — she might be a blackmailer. And she's dark and beautiful, which affects my boss like catnip."

"Say no more," said the school-

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teacher, champing at the bit. "What was the name again of that dive the poor man took off for?"

Malone stood holding up the bar in the murky gloom of Lucky's, reflecting that, apart from the dusty fishnets and glass floats with which the place was decorated, it was almost like being back in Chicago. There was an aroma like that in Joe the Angel's City Hall Bar, a dusty, rich, crowded smell.

The patrons were dressed weirdly — beach togs, sweat shirts, bare midriffs, and dark glasses predominating. He surveyed them distastefully, and was about to turn back to the bar when he realized with an electric shock that ran down his spine that the woman he had come so far to seek was sitting in a booth against the farther wall. She looked very much like the photograph in his pocket, only perhaps the print had blurred a little. Malone was ready to move in, and then saw that she was having a *tête-à-tête* with an exceptionally handsome young man, and toying with a tall drink. This wasn't the time. He put his foot back on the brass rail and ordered beer with rye.

"Smart guy," said the bartender, whose face was a map of Madison Square Garden.

"What's wrong with my order?"

The drinks were slammed down in front of him. "I don't like slummers," said the barman. He was looking hard at Malone's hand-painted Christmas necktie.

A number of other people looked at it too, perhaps because it was the only tie being worn in the entire place. Three drinks later, a plump woman in slacks spoke frankly to the little lawyer. "You're a nice guy at heart," she said. "You shouldn't come here snooting people."

"I beg your pardon?" said Malone in bewilderment.

"That la-de-da necktie," she said, and made a primitive noise with her lips.

Malone bought her a drink, then surreptitiously slipped the offending scarf off his neck and into his coat pocket. "When in Rome," he said, "burn Roman candles at both ends." He was just about to start singing *Killarney* in hopes of getting up a quartet when he looked in the mirror and saw that Nina LaCosta was now alone.

Carefully carrying his drink, Malone crossed the room without the slightest sway in his walk, and slid into the vacant seat. Nina looked up at him and said, "Blow!"

Now that he was this near, even in the murky gloom he could see that her resemblance to the photograph was not so close after all. A walking tribute to cosmetic art, but at close range the years showed through. "Miss LaCosta —" he began.

"You want my autograph?" she asked, brightening a little.

"Why — yes. I also want a confidential chat with you."

But heavy lids were already dropping across the still-beautiful eyes. "I

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said, *blow!*" Nina repeated. "I don't drink with strangers."

"I'm no stranger. I'm Malone — John J. Malone."

"I don't care if you're John J. Rockefeller." She raised her voice. "Lucky!" The barman materialized out of nowhere. "Lucky, would you kindly take this fresh guy away and bring me a stale drink, or vice versa?"

"Wait!" cried Malone. But a moment later he felt the damp night air on his face.

"Don't hurry back soon," Lucky told him.

As a desperate last resort Malone scribbled the name of his hotel and bungalow number on a card, adding a five-dollar bill. "Just tell Miss LaCosta that if she'll come to see me I have news that will be to her advantage."

The man spat on the sidewalk and went back inside. Malone took out a fresh cigar and had just moved into the shelter of a nearby billboard when he looked up and saw his quarry come hurriedly out of the door and pop into a taxi that had just stopped to disgorge some frolicking customers. "212 Twentieth," came her clear soprano, as the car door slammed.

Back in Chicago Malone would have whistled for the next Yellow or Checker, but here there was no next. Not for twenty interminable minutes, and then it was only because Miss Hildegarde Withers came sailing up in one. "*You!*" he said brightly. The two friends shook hands warily, mutual respect tinctured with suspicion. "Thanks for the lovely hand-painted tie," Malone told her.

Miss Withers gave him a questioning look, and his hand went to his throat and then to his pocket. "I must have lost it. A hazard of the chase. I'm hot on somebody's trail, may I borrow your cab?" He was already climbing into it.

"You may," she said firmly. "But I go too. I gather Miss LaCosta got away?"

"And I gather Maggie's been talking. Never mind, I'd like your expert opinion. After what happened inside, how shall I report to Joe Vastrelli?"

Miss Withers listened, and then said it was too early to pass judgement. "Not so good that she hangs out in a bar, but you say she had only one drink. Not so good that she was with a young man —"

"But a very good-looking young man. I think I've seen his picture in the papers or somewhere. And she wasn't flirting with him — he left alone."

Finally the taxi drew up beside a peeling stucco apartment house on a Santa Monica street lined with untidy palm trees, and Malone got out. But the schoolteacher was close upon his heels. "With me as chaperone, you'll not be mistaken for a wolf this time," she pointed out. A card in the lobby read *LaCosta — 2B*, so they hurried up the stairs. Miss Withers rang the bell and Malone knocked, but nobody answered. "Stalemate," said the schoolma'am in a disappointed tone.

But Malone tried the knob and the

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door opened. Lights were on, but obviously nobody was home. Doors concealed the inevitable wall-bed, a tiny bath, and bare kitchenette. There was a strong smell of tobacco, perfume, and mice.

"No books," observed Miss Withers, disapprovingly. "Only trashy movie magazines."

"No liquor, only empties," said Malone, who had investigated the kitchenette.

But there were both men's and women's clothing in the closet and the chest of drawers. Miss Withers shook her head disapprovingly, and went on rummaging beneath the lining of a drawer filled with black-lacey but worn underwear. She found a man's photo.

"That's him!" cried Malone. "The collegiate character she was with at Lucky's."

"Dear, dear! But one can hardly blame her — he has a lovely profile." Miss Withers bagged the photograph and edged toward the door. "Shouldn't we go?"

"This is a comfortable chair," the little lawyer said. "And Nina will be here any minute. We should have a showdown. I can't go back to Vastrelli and admit I didn't even get to talk to her. He's entitled to something for his money."

"Oh, *no!*" cried Miss Withers. Malone flushed at being so openly contradicted, and then saw that she was staring past him toward the hall door. There stood a man, tall and cadaverously thin, with an actor's mobile mouth, a bluish jaw, and eyes like agates. In one arm he held a large paper sack; the other hand was lumped in his coat pocket. "Not anyone I would care to meet in a dark alley," said the schoolteacher to herself. "Or for that matter in a lighted alley." But aloud she said cheerily, "Why, this must be Mr. LaCosta! Do come in. We were just waiting for your — for Nina. This is Mr. Malone, the famous Chicago attorney —"

"From Chicago, eh?" The man set the bag of groceries down on the table so hard that it split open, scattering oranges, coffee, cornflakes, hamburger and a half-pint of blended bourbon. "So Joe Vastrelli is trying to make trouble again, is he? Sending his stooges out here. You go back and tell him he can —"

"One moment," said Malone dramatically, in his best courtroom voice. "Nina has a chance to go back to her first husband, who still adores her; she has an opportunity to take up again the life for which she is fitted. He'll give her every luxury. Would you stand in her way?"

LaCosta's laugh was not pretty. "I wouldn't stand in her way, counsellor. But Nina isn't going anywhere; she's happy with me in our little love-nest. So *get out!*"

And, respecting the menacing bulge in his pocket, they got. "Really," said Miss Withers in the taxi, "I don't see that you have much choice in what to report to your client. Nina is still mixed up with a very unpleasant character indeed."

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He nodded, a little sad. "I'll dictate the letter tonight." But the hotel bungalow was dark. Maggie had obviously retired to her little room in the main building.

As they entered, Miss Withers sniffed and said, "Your little secretary has taken to Turkish cigarettes and exotic perfumes. Chypre, isn't it?"

"Maggie must have gone Hollywood too. Back home she's more the Lily-of-the-Valley type." Malone plunged into dictating his report to Vastrelli; out of the kindness of his warm Irish heart he softened the bad news as much as he could. Then, as the schoolteacher briskly inserted paper and carbons in Maggie's typewriter, he excused himself. "I'll just brush up a bit and we'll be off in search of a cold bird and a bottle."

He was gone what seemed rather a longish time, and Miss Withers was clattering away halfway down the page when he reappeared, looking as if he had swallowed a bad oyster. "Look in there," he said, pointing to the bedroom. "Do you see what I see?"

Miss Withers looked, rubbed her eyes, looked again — and still saw Nina LaCosta sprawled across the bed. Around her still-lovely neck, tied tighter than anything could be worn and live, was a certain hand-painted necktie with colors like a neon sunset. Malone, much shaken, explained that he had been trying in vain to undo it. "This is one time we're going to call the authorities," said the schoolteacher. But she had hardly picked up the instrument when there was the wolf-wail of sirens outside, and then suddenly the place was swarming with uniforms.

"That's what I call *service*," said Malone, admiringly.

The session lasted until well after midnight and finally, when they thought it must be over, a Lieutenant Lumm appeared, took over, and went through it all again. He was a bald, youngish man with glasses and a sandpaper voice. "Now Malone," said the lieutenant, sounding for all the world like a federal income-tax examiner, "this looks pretty clear to me. You admit you got thrown out of a Santa Monica bar earlier this evening for trying to make passes at the victim. You bribed the bartender to give her your card with this address and to tell her if she dropped in she'd learn something to her advantage. That was the bait that fetched her. But she didn't want to play pattycake, and you got mad and strangled her with what you admit is your own necktie."

"I object!" said John J. Malone, "On the grounds that —"

But Miss Withers objected still more. "Mr. Malone has been with me for the past hour or more." She repeated her story.

Lumm rubbed a nutcracker jaw thoughtfully. "Okay. So he still had time to do the job while you were typing. He found her sleeping on his bed, probably passed out from working on his case of whisky while waiting for him to come home. Or maybe you're lying — as his secretary you'd

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be open to his bribes or threats —"

"I am only a secretary *pro tem*," she snapped, "and I don't tell lies!"

"Um hum." The lieutenant consulted his notes. "You gave your name to the officer as Hildegarde Withers, *age 38?*"

"I meant *over* 38!" she corrected swiftly. "And young man, I suggest that Nina LaCosta was killed by somebody who wanted to frame Mr. Malone — the same somebody who took her handbag, which you'll notice is missing."

Lumm shook his head. "We found the handbag outside in a rosebush, where your boy-friend tossed it after he rifled the contents."

"I object!" cried Malone. The lieutenant told him to shut up. "Exception!"

"Looks like he did it," Lumm said to Miss Withers. "And you're an accomplice or accessory if you persist in covering up for him."

"Who, pray, is covering? As soon as I saw the body I hurried to the phone —"

"Says you. The dame who tipped us off had a much younger voice."

"I have probably aged with the strain of the past few hours. Seriously, Officer, shouldn't you be looking for the killer instead of badgering innocent bystanders?"

"A bird in the hand," Lumm said firmly. Then the phone rang. He snatched it up, then after a moment handed the instrument to Malone. "No tricks now," he warned. "It's long distance." He moved closer, evidently hoping to pick up information.

The voice of some female robot said tinnily, "Is this Mr. John J. Malone? Chicago is calling. Ready with Mr. Malone — go ahead."

It was Joe Vastrelli, far away but clear. "Been trying to get you all day," he shouted. "Malone, what are you doing besides spending my money? Found Nina yet?"

"She just left," Malone said desperately, without bothering to add that she had left feet first in a wicker basket.

"Well, is she coming back to me or not?" But at this point the impatient Lumm took over. After a few questions he assured the fond husband that his long-lost bride would be returned to him after the autopsy, if he was willing to pay traveling costs for one corpse and an attendant. Then he hung up, though Joe Vastrelli was still screaming with shock and rage. Chicago, Malone thought, must be having a major earthquake. And Vastrelli would be on the next plane with blood in his eye.

"Now this gets better and better," observed the lieutenant with professional detachment. "This case'll get written up in the true detective magazines, I shouldn't wonder. You come out here to try and locate a guy's wife and get her to return; then you fall for her and wind up bumping her off because you were afraid she'd tell her husband about your making passes. . . ."

The man had a bright-light-and-rubber-hose look in his eye, and was,

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Miss Withers decided, about to suggest a trip down to the station. "One moment," she interrupted, and played her ace of trumps. For a long time Lieutenant Lumm wouldn't hear of any such thing. He resisted stubbornly — and then to everybody's surprise the evil hour was postponed.

"But don't either of you try to leave town," was Lumm's final warning. "Because for my money you're both in this up to your ears." And he slammed the door.

A chill gray dawn crept into the east windows, but Miss Withers and John J. Malone sat in the bungalow living room, with Maggie nodding disapprovingly in a corner and fairly oozing, "I told you so!"

"This reminds me of the Larsen case, and that night on the Super-Century," said Miss Withers.

Malone looked into his highball glass and found it, as he had expected, empty again. "It wasn't a bad idea of yours about talking the lieutenant into phoning long distance for our character references," he admitted. "Only whether Captain von Flanagan will ever forgive me for having him yanked out of bed at four o'clock in the morning —"

"It was *five* in New York, and a wonder that Inspector Oscar Piper didn't disown me entirely. Even so, I don't think that Lumm was convinced. There is a man with a mean, suspicious nature. Probably he's just giving us rope enough to hang ourselves."

"I have worse worries than that," Malone told her. He sighed and stood up. "I'm sorry our date turned out this way." He held out his hand. "Well, goodbye."

"Goodbye? But I'm not deserting the sinking ship!"

"I am," the little lawyer told her. "Before Vastrelli gets here."

"And if you try to get away, you'll be arrested," Miss Withers reminded him. "Take a couple of aspirins and try to get some sleep. I'll be back later on."

Malone finally dozed off on the divan, waking minutes or hours later to see his secretary prowling around. Maggie said something, but he only buried his head under a pillow, muttering, "Okay, but go away, will you?"

Maggie finally went away, and he slept fitfully until a little after noon when Miss Hildegarde Withers burst in upon him, looking like the canary that ate the cat. "Good morning, merry sunshine!" the schoolteacher greeted him. "I gather that you didn't dream up a solution to our mutual problem? Neither did I, worse luck. But I've been thinking. Remember that 'phone call yesterday leading you to Lucky's? It was all wrong."

"It was not! Nina was there all right, because I saw her and spoke to her —"

"Of course. But the girl didn't *call* you from Lucky's — it's only a ten-cent call from Santa Monica to here, and you said the operator asked for fifteen."

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The little lawyer brightened. "She did say something about its being a bar *out* at Canyon Cove, meaning she was somewhere in town. Probably a night spot, because I remember hearing marimba music and a singer. Lucky's has no floor show." Suddenly Malone felt fine again. "The girl is the key to it all. Alice? Elma?"

"Alva," spoke up Maggie, as she came in through the door with coffee. "Alva Jones. I know because she told me when she came this morning to collect her money."

"What?" Malone stared at her. "She was *here* — and you let her get away?"

"She was a foot taller than me, and outweighed me twenty pounds. I couldn't very well throw her and sit on her head. You said it was okay to take the money out of your billfold —" Maggie squared off belligerently.

But it was Miss Withers who poured oil on the troubled waters. "All is not lost that glitters," she said. "Cheer up, we all have a lunch date at La Lucia."

"La Lucia in Hollywood?" gasped Maggie. "Right around the corner from Paradox and OKO, where all the stars eat?"

"Perhaps murderers sometimes eat there too."

And the schoolteacher would say no more. But they came at last to a vine-covered one-story building crammed with people and redolent of herbs and roasting meat and expensive vintages, and before Maggie had time to recognize more than one or two of her cinema deities a headwaiter shunted them off to a large curtained booth in a far corner. "We'll order later," said Miss Withers firmly. "We're expecting a Mr. Gray."

The man bowed and left them before Malone could get in a word about a much-needed eye-opener. "Just as well," said the schoolteacher. "We'll all need our wits about us when our guest of honor arrives." She produced a folded photograph.

Maggie peered over her shoulder, then cried, "Jackson Gray! *The* Jackson Gray, voted the juvenile discovery of the year! Oh, pinch me, somebody, I'm dreaming!"

Malone obligingly pinched her, but his heart wasn't in it. He looked at Miss Withers, who said, "Very simple. I noticed the studio credit stamp on the back of the photo, did a little checking this morning, then phoned Mr. Gray at Paradox, and put a flea in his ear." She looked at the old-fashioned watch pinned to her old-fashioned bosom. "He's late. Probably walking up and down outside —"

But no. The headwaiter was bringing him over now — a tall, very young man with curly hair, a dimple, and a look of having been dragged through a knothole. There were introductions all around, and Maggie almost swooned. "Haven't time to eat," Gray said. "Got to get back on the set. Now what's all this about?"

So the story hadn't hit the papers yet. Miss Withers took the bit in her

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teeth. "Mr. Gray, do you know a woman who calls herself Nina LaCosta?"

Brittle silence. "I know lots of women," the boy said woodenly. "Maybe I know her." His face was suddenly worldly-wise. "Is this a shakedown?"

"Don't be foolish," snapped the schoolteacher. "Nina LaCosta was strangled to death last evening in Mr. Malone's bedroom. We're trying to find out who did it."

Jackson Gray said nothing, but he bit his lip hard. "You were out with her last night," Malone put in. "Wasn't she a bit old for you?"

A tumult of emotions flashed across the young man's face. "Just the right age," he said softly. "To have been my mother, I mean."

"*What?*" cried Miss Withers, Malone, and Maggie all in one breath.

"Look, I don't know who you people are or what you want," continued the young man bitterly. "I've already had about all I can stand. But you see, I was brought up as an orphan by some relatives after my father died. Nobody ever mentioned my mother. But a couple of months ago a woman got in touch with me and — well, she said she was my real mother. She said I had no right to the name of Gray because she hadn't been legally divorced when she went through the ceremony with my father. She seemed to know some of the family history, and — well, I used to meet her in that bar every pay day."

"You gave her money, like a dutiful son?" asked Malone approvingly.

"If she really was my mother she never took any interest in me until I got a start in Hollywood. I got a lucky break and a lot of publicity on one picture, but a scandal right now would put a quick-freeze on it. I paid to keep her mouth shut."

Miss Withers wanted to know why in this day and age anybody would worry about the possible exposure of a bar-sinister. "I'm not twenty-one," the boy admitted. "If what she said was true she could have taken over as my legal guardian." He shrugged. "I'll not pretend a lot of grief I don't feel. But, Mr. Malone, you say she was killed in your room. Did anybody find her handbag? Because I gave her a hundred in cash and a check for $250 last night, and it would be worth a lot to me to have that check back with no publicity."

Maggie said quickly, "I was being questioned when the policeman came in with her handbag. There was no money or checks."

"Oh," said Jackson Gray, his shoulders sagging. He stood up. "Got to get back. But if that check should turn up, I'll gladly pay a thousand bucks — and no questions asked." He was looking at Malone pointedly as he turned away.

Maggie sighed and Miss Withers sniffed. After a moment Malone said glumly, "I wish I knew if he was insulting me or retaining me."

The schoolteacher said she wished she knew if Jackson Gray was trying to draw a red herring across a very

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muddled trail. Which reminded them of food, and after a fabulous lunch (still chargeable to Joe Vastrelli, Malone hoped) they returned to the hotel bungalow for a council of war.

"The trouble with this situation," observed Miss Withers, "is that we've been sitting still and letting things happen to us. Let's fix it so we happen to things."

"Whoops, take cover!" cried Maggie from the window. "We got visitors."

"Not Lieutenant Lumm?" moaned Malone. "If I take an aspirin do you think he'll go away?"

"Lumm and a portly gent in a blue suit, who must be from out of town because he wears a necktie and a hat, also a big black scowl. Boss, could it be —?"

It was. Joe Vastrelli was tense and white-lipped, rigidly self-controlled and deadly as a ticking bomb. But the lieutenant was still in charge, and he got right down to cases. "Malone, Mr. Vastrelli phoned headquarters as soon as he arrived at the airport. He's given us a new angle —"

"Fine and dandy," Malone said. "We can certainly use it."

Lumm said, unsmilingly, "It's his suggestion that perhaps at the time back in Chicago when he retained you to look for his wife, he might have given the erroneous impression that he would be just as well satisfied if something happened to her — so she couldn't carry out any possible intentions of blackmailing him. Then you could ask a big fat fee —"

"Holy St. Vitus!" cried Malone.

"Because," Lumm went on stolidly, "if you killed her thinking you were doing a favor for a wealthy and influential client —"

"Making Mr. Vastrelli the instigator of a conspiracy to commit murder, and liable to criminal prosecution," put in Miss Withers helpfully from the bleachers.

"Shut up, ma'am," said Lieutenant Lumm. "Well, Malone?"

"Look," said the little lawyer desperately. "I never laid hands on a woman except in self-defense. I didn't kill Nina LaCosta. My only idea was to locate her and make a report, a copy of which is still in that typewriter. And if I had killed her, would I do it right here and leave the body on my own bed?"

"All murderers are dumb," Lumm told him. "Or they wouldn't murder. And maybe you were just smart enough to make it look like the corpse was planted on you."

"It was! Nina was either killed by Jackson Gray, a young actor she was shaking down because she might or might not have been his mother, or by LaCosta himself, who didn't want to see her toss him overboard and go back to a life of luxury. One or the other of them knew she was coming here to see me, and he came here first and —"

"Wait!" cried Miss Withers, about to point out the flaws in that theory. But nobody was listening. Vastrelli had suddenly erupted and was aiming a Sunday punch for Malone's jaw.

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"Go on, hit me in front of witnesses," said the little lawyer quickly. "I'll sue you for fifty thousand dollars charging aggravated assault —"

Vastrelli stopped, but perhaps that was only because Lieutenant Lumm's heavy hand was on his shoulder. "None of that, now!" warned the officer sharply. The big man turned away, muttering.

"You can't fire me, I quit!" Malone said.

But Vastrelli made an abrupt about-face. "No, you don't! You're in this too deep to get out now. If you killed Nina, I'll see you're hanged higher'n a kite. If you didn't, then this is your chance to get busy and find out who did. You can name your own fee if you'll just give me five minutes alone with the —"

Lumm told him that this was Beverly Hills, not Cicero, and the law would take its course. There was more of the same, and as they finally left, John J. Malone stared after them. "Baby, it's cold outside," he said, shivering. There had been a look in Vastrelli's eye that suggested somebody's feet in a cement block and the waters of the great gray green greasy Chicago River closing over that somebody's head. "Maggie, on second thought maybe we're not ever going back to Chicago. It could be unhealthy."

"Stuff and nonsense," Miss Withers cut in. "What we must do is find the real killer, and soon. After all, we're not entirely in the dark. We know that the murderer hired some girl to phone you and lure you out to Lucky's — probably the same girl who later reported to the police that there was trouble in your bungalow. The murderer himself must have been at Lucky's too, or he wouldn't have known that Nina was there — nor would he have been able to pick up the necktie you so carelessly dropped. You've seen the suspects — was any of them in the crowd at the bar last night?"

"Only Gray, and he left." Malone shrugged. "There were some men around, a whole crowd in the back room, mostly odd characters in yachting caps and bathing suits and sun glasses and so forth, but I didn't notice them much. I'm a woman-watcher myself."

The schoolteacher's sniff was monumental. "Anyway, when Alva phoned, it was a fifteen-cent call, which means it came from San Fernando to the north, Culver City to the south, or downtown Los Angeles. If we could only find what cabarets in that area were featuring a singer and a marimba band at the dinner hour last night —"

"Bingo!" cried Malone, and grabbed the phone directory. Two hours and twenty calls later he came up for air, announcing that, according to the booking agents for third-string night-club talent, the place in question must be The Casbah, on Main Street, downtown. "Not only do they have a singer and a marimba band, they have B-girls too." He smoothed down his thinning hair, and straightened his tie.

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Miss Withers stood up eagerly. "Will you come with me to The Casbah?"

"If you don't mind," said the little lawyer, "he travels fastest who travels alone, especially in saloons. If I took you two respectable females down there with me I'd find out less than nothing. Besides, it's too early. If Alva does work there as a percentage girl she'd hardly be around yet. I'll have time to get the works in a barber shop and cash a check." He went out, humming *Danny Boy*.

"Cashing a check," commented Maggie. "Malone always says the quickest way to make friends is to break a hundred-dollar bill in a bar."

"Men have all the fun!" said Miss Withers, and in desperation went home and washed her hair. It was after eleven when she gave in and rang up the bungalow, to hear Maggie declare that there was no news. The schoolteacher said, "Oh. But it's late, and I'm worried."

"It's never late for Malone. You don't know him."

"And he doesn't know Los Angeles' Main Street, otherwise known as Skid Row. I think a rescue party is indicated. Would you care to join me?"

"Okay," said Maggie, and ten minutes later she climbed into a taxi beside the eager schoolma'am. "But Malone's probably only in the bar at this Casbah place, leading a barbershop quartet in *The Rose of Tralee*."

"And he may also be putting his head in a noose. I don't yet see the picture, but I begin to see the outlines of the frame. I've been making some phone calls — to the county clerk at Santa Anna over in Orange County, who kindly looked up the old records. And to the airport, of course — though that was a letdown. Still, there's something shivery about this entire situation."

The cab finally deposited them at The Casbah, which for all its orchestra and dance floor was just another dive. A large proportion of its customers were enlisted Navy, gloomily drinking up their shore leave. Of the several houris lying in wait at the far end of the bar, none was known to Maggie. "Alva isn't here," she declared. Then she noticed that each of the girls was wearing an orchid corsage. "But I think Malone *was* here."

The flustered and overworked man behind the bar was of no help. "I know from nothing," he admitted. "But I'm only filling in for the regular bartender — he got in the middle of an argument and lost a couple of front teeth a while ago."

"Malone *was* here, indeed!" agreed Miss Withers. By the shameless pretense of being Alva's aunt from out of town, and by the judicious use of a couple of five-dollar bills, the schoolteacher secured a certain address.

Their taxi hauled them to a small and dingy hotel in the oldest section of old Los Angeles, located atop a hill which the driver called *The Angels' Flight*. The two women entered somewhat gingerly, for all angels had obviously flown from this vicinity long ago. But the lobby was empty except

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for a man behind the desk, who was snoring quietly. They went on upstairs.

"Maybe we should have called first," Maggie said. "That girl was beautiful, in a billboard-blonde sort of way. And that type is one of Malone's weaknesses —"

"Of which he has a complete set," concluded Miss Withers dryly. She knocked on a door and they entered — then stopped short, staring.

"I'll go quietly," said John J. Malone, without looking up from his drink. The little lawyer was slumped in a chair by the window, looking as if he had just swallowed two bad oysters and an old clam. All the misery of the world was on his shoulders, but he clutched a familiar bottle of rye as if it were a talisman.

"We hardly expected to find you alone," admitted the schoolteacher.

"I am not alone," admitted the little lawyer. "She's in the bathroom. Strangled, and, naturally, with another of my neckties. This is the last straw. I know when I'm licked. Get out of here while you can. Save yourselves — take to the boats!"

"Take to some black coffee!" snapped Miss Withers. She looked into the bath, and came out after a moment, somewhat pale around the gills.

"Believe it or not," continued the unhappy lawyer, "I found her this way. But everybody in The Casbah will remember that I wanted Alva's address so bad I had an argument with the bartender to get it. Would one of you call the police and make a reservation for me at the nearest gas chamber?"

"You're quite sure about the tie?" demanded Miss Withers doubtfully.

"It's a hand-painted Kelly-green number that Jake and Helene Justus gave me last St. Patrick's Day. It was in my hotel closet last night."

"So was that bottle of rye!" Maggie cut in, wide-eyed. "At least it's the same brand you got a case of and that we charged off to Vastrelli as *incidentals!*"

"That," pronounced Miss Withers solemnly, "is not coincidence. It's a frame-up — a lovely, hand-painted frame!"

"You needn't look so *pleased!*" Malone said, almost peevishly.

"I was just thinking," said the schoolteacher, "that somebody wants to get you almost as badly as they wanted to get Nina LaCosta."

"Look," suggested Maggie hopefully, "we could cut off the necktie, and take it and the bottle with us, and each of us hold one of his arms and maybe we could get him away —"

"No —" said Miss Withers.

"Go on," Malone told them. "Sail out of here, you two ships deserting the sinking rat."

"Maggie, call the police at once," the schoolteacher decided. "Then come away."

"Goodbye!" intoned Malone theatrically. "The rest is — silence."

"The rest is a warpath, and Maggie and I are going out on it. I hope that your hours of incarceration are brief,

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but it may brighten them for you to know that we are going out now in search of Jackson Gray. Sit tight."

John J. Malone hiccupped gently. "That," he admitted, "will be easy."

The homicide office in the Beverly Hills police station offers hardly room enough to swing a cat. Certainly not enough for a rubber hose, John J. Malone was thinking. He was sitting on a hard chair, handcuffed, cold sober, and wrathful. "I want a lawyer," he was saying. "I want a dozen lawyers and a lie-detector test and a liverwurst sandwich with raw onions."

Lieutenant Lumm looked at him. "You know, until tonight I never really believed you were guilty. I just thought I'd put a burr under your tail and needle you into helping us solve this murder. But this Alva Jones job changes all that. Why'd you kill her, Malone? Was it because she tipped you off yesterday to where Nina LaCosta was, and therefore was in a position to blackmail you?"

"If I confess can I have a hot pastrami sandwich with a kosher dill pickle?" Malone rattled his chains. "Lieutenant, will you book me so I can get some sleep?"

Lumm slammed the desk. "Okay, you're booked!" He busied himself with certain grim formalities for a while, and then called in a subordinate. "Notify Los Angeles too, Sergeant. And have LaCosta released at once, with apologies."

"You never should have arrested LaCosta," Malone observed. "He would have been a lovely suspect, only if he had murdered Nina he'd have got the hundred dollars in cash that was in her handbag, and if he had got the money he'd never have brought home groceries for a cheap supper or bought only a half-pint of whiskey."

"You can talk in court," Lumm snapped at him. "And Sergeant, phone Mr. Joseph Vastrelli at his hotel and tell him the case is closed and that if he'll stop in here and sign a statement he's free to go back to Chicago whenever he pleases."

"Vastrelli, coming here?" Malone cried. "Lock me in a cell, quick!"

"Shut up." The lieutenant turned away. "And then get hold of Jackson Gray and tell him to be here first thing in the morning. He ties into it too, and I want to know just what Malone said to him at lunch."

"Speaking of lunch —" began the little lawyer.

But the sergeant came back in a few minutes to report that while LaCosta had been turned loose, and Vastrelli was on his way down to the station, Jackson Gray could not be located. "The clerk at his hotel says he got a phone call about an hour ago and rushed out of the place."

Lumm looked blank for a moment. "No, don't worry," Malone reassured him. "It isn't Gray. He wouldn't murder a blackmailer; he'd just keep on paying. In fact, the only person who ought to be wearing these handcuffs —"

The lieutenant was on the phone,

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ordering a routine pickup on Hildegarde Withers and the secretary. Then the door burst open and Joe Vastrelli swept in like a cyclone, his face dark with rage. "So it was you all the time, you little shyster!" And again he swung his roundhouse right — before Lumm could untangle himself from the telephone. John J. Malone had never been at more of a disadvantage, but in the coolness of desperation he managed to roll with the punch, and then brought his manacled wrists heavily down on the big man's head, knocking him colder than a witch's kiss.

"Your prisoner, Lieutenant," said Malone wearily. "Vastrelli waited for years for a chance to revenge himself on the woman who walked out on him. And then when I made a fool of him in court he decided to send me out here, kill Nina, and pin it on me."

"Getting both of them at one fell swoop!" cried a confident voice from the doorway. And Miss Hildegarde Withers stalked in, like some ungainly bird of prey. "That's exactly how it happened, Lieutenant." She stepped nonchalantly over the recumbent form. "Oh, I see you've been trying to get a confession already."

"Enough is too much!" said Lieutenant Lumm with deadly calmness. "You two hooligans have been making monkeys out of me and the whole police department —"

"It was nothing, really," Malone said modestly.

Lumm hit all the buttons on his desk. "Take that man downstairs and give him first aid! And lock up these two jokers and throw away the key —"

"You'll be sorry," Miss Withers told him. "Because Vastrelli really *is* the murderer, you know."

"He is? Then just tell me this. How can a man commit a murder in Beverly Hills when he's two thousand miles away? Malone and I both talked to Vastrelli in Chicago before his wife's body was cold!"

"That does take a bit of explaining," admitted the schoolteacher. She looked wistfully at the telephone and then at her watch. "But, Lieutenant, if you'll have your men unhand me, and all of us sit down for a quiet chat —"

"Lock 'em both up!" yelped Lieutenant Lumm, almost tearing his sparse hair.

"But you can't do this to me — to us!" cried John J. Malone.

Only they could, and did.

Iron doors clanged. "What can I order for breakfast?" asked the lawyer.

The turnkey said, "Anything you like. Only you get dry bread and coffee." He went away. Malone reminded himself that stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage, and stretched out on the hard mattress. Yet his eyes had barely closed when there was the rattle of the lock again. "Let's go," said the turnkey.

"Shot at sunrise, without even a trial?" the lawyer cried.

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But he was taken back upstairs, shoved into Lumm's office where Miss Hildegarde Withers, looking slightly the worse for wear, was waiting. She winked at him.

Lieutenant Lumm came in, looking happy and a trifle sheepish. "Sorry I lost my temper," he said. "But I guess I made a terrible mistake —"

"Vastrelli's confessed?" cried Malone eagerly.

"He will," the lieutenant said. "When he comes to from that conk on the head and finds out that his brother just phoned me long-distance from Chicago and admitted the frame-up. It seems Jim Vastrelli just read the papers and realized what he'd got mixed up in. He provided Joe with an alibi for murder, beforehand. Joe's been out here for a week, leaving his brother back in Chicago to put through phone calls in his name. It was the brother who flew out on the plane yesterday, also under Joe's name. Joe met him at the airport, changed hats and coats and luggage, and the brother took the first plane back."

"Neat," said Malone judicially. "Very neat."

"I've notified the Chicago police to pick up Jim Vastrelli and hold him for extradition," Lumm continued. "I'm going to —"

"May I say a word?" put in Miss Hildegarde Withers anxiously.

"Later," the lieutenant told her. "I want to finish telling you both how sorry I am. I feel I owe you an apology. . . ."

Malone waved his hand in a think-nothing-of-it gesture, but the schoolteacher said, "And we owe you an explanation — at least, I do. Before you go any farther I must tell you that while the phone call you just received was correct in its basic information — it simply had to be, because nothing else fits the facts — it wasn't exactly from the brother of Joe Vastrelli."

Lieutenant Lumm's smile froze on his face. "I should have known!" he whispered, wide-eyed. "Of course, another phony act! Because I have a good ear for identifying voices, and I *know* that the man I just arrested was the same one I talked to over long distance the night of the murder —"

"You talked to him," Miss Withers said quickly. "But *not* over long distance. One doesn't have to be in Chicago to give the impression that he's calling from there — not if he has a young woman around to mimic the voice of the operator. Vastrelli used a B-girl he picked up in a Main Street bar to do his phoning for him, and later he murdered her when he found out that she'd been greedy enough to come to Malone for her promised fifty, and thus put us on her trail. He planted a necktie and a bottle of whiskey that he'd taken from Malone's room the night he killed Nina, just to make the frame tighter. Nasty character, Mr. Vastrelli."

Malone nodded placidly. "That's why I bopped him."

"A fairy story!" cried the thwarted lieutenant, wildly pressing buttons.

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"Sergeant! Come in here and take these —"

Suddenly the room was filled with uniforms, but amazingly enough, instead of hauling Malone and Miss Withers back to their dungeon cells, the officers were shaking Lumm's hand and patting him on the back. "Take a bow, Lieutenant!" somebody was saying. "That lug Vastrelli's confessed to both murders! Will this burn up the Los Angeles boys!"

"Words fail me," said Malone fervently, as he and Miss Withers came out into the streets of Beverly Hills, deserted and pale in the moonlight.

"We must hurry back to the hotel," said the schoolteacher. "Maggie is there alone with Jackson Gray —"

"He can always scream for help, can't he?"

"She was the operator and young Gray played the part of Jim Vastrelli, with a slight foreign accent. One of his most successful roles, I'd say. He was delighted to help — I made him very happy by discovering that his mother was really married to his father, and that she also showed proof of a divorce from Vastrelli."

"He'll be happier yet," Malone said, "when I give him his check back. It was crumpled up in Vastrelli's hand, you know — the man was evidently going to slip it into my pocket in the fracas, only I conked him first."

"Maybe he'll even take us all out to Ciro's for dinner tomorrow night!" said Miss Withers.

The next night was a huge success. Maggie floated around the floor in the arms of Jackson Gray and once she was even asked for her autograph. Miss Withers ran into a famous screenwriter who had once been one of her grubby urchins at P.S. 38, and was embraced and feted. But inevitably John J. Malone drifted out into the bar. There was a luscious black-haired girl with bright blue eyes there for a while, and then it turned out that she was near-sighted and had mistaken him for an assistant director at Fox.

All alone, the little lawyer ordered another drink and then began to sing softly, under his breath, "*Did your mother come from Ireland. . . ?*" There was a man down the bar who looked like a bass, but he went away.

Then someone climbed onto the stool beside him and ordered a lemonade. Miss Withers chimed in with a soft, true contralto — "*For there's something in you Irish. . . .*"

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SPECIAL AWARD FOR THE BEST "MYSTERY": C. S. FORESTER

As a young man, C. S. Forester studied to become a doctor, but like so many other would-be physicians, including A. Conan Doyle, W. Somerset Maugham, and A. J. Cronin, Mr. Forester finally gave up all thought of a medical career and turned to writing. His first novel — PAYMENT DEFERRED, *a psychological study of crime and conscience — was a notable success, and later as a play and a motion picture it brought fame to Charles Laughton in the role of the chief character.*

Mr. Forester's literary interests then widened: without ever forsaking the crime field, especially in the short form, he invented the now celebrated figure of Captain Hornblower, a man of action with a complex, Conradian mind, and in a few books Mr. Forester proved himself an outstanding historical novelist.

But Mr. Forester has even more strings to his bow. For EQMM's Sixth Annual Contest, he submitted an altogether different type of story, to which we gave a Special Award for the Best "Mystery." Note the quotes: they are a warning. Caveat lector . . .

When we asked Mr. Forester to tell us something of the origin of his unusual story, he replied: "I never dare to analyze how my stories come to me. It is like taking a watch to pieces and trying to get all the parts together afterwards."

Thank God that C. S. Forester is a tale-maker, not a watch-maker . . .

THE MAN WHOSE WISHES CAME TRUE

by C. S. FORESTER

THE FIRST TIME Walter Halford drove past his grave I was with him. We were driving through that fantastic Los Angeles cemetery which everyone has heard about lately. Halford was at the wheel and his quick eye caught sight of the inscription — I had not seen it. He braked the convertible to a sudden stop (he was a bad driver), and put the car into reverse and backed hurriedly up to the place again. I was too worried by the thought that there might be a car immediately behind us (Halford was not the kind of driver to look behind him before reversing) to take special note of what had attracted his attention; Halford had to point it out to

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me. It was a very plain tombstone, with a very brief inscription.

Walter Hammond Halford, 1895–1925

"What a coincidence!" said Halford. "That's my name in full — I've never met any living person with it. Plenty of Halfords, of course, but no Walter Hammond Halford — not even a W. H. Halford. And that's the year of my birth, too. Funny that he and I, whoever he was, had exactly the same name, and were born the same year on opposite sides of the Atlantic. Wonder what he was like?"

"He died young, at any rate," I said.

"Yes. I hadn't even come to America at that time, so there was no chance of our meeting. Unless he was in France with the A.E.F. I met a few Americans in 1918; I might have come across him then, in some *estaminet*, maybe, and not known his name."

"Maybe you did," I said, with all the patience I could muster.

I have never been one to be much intrigued by coincidences — people who exclaim when they meet someone with the same name or the same birthday bore me. And this was someone who died twenty-five years ago. . . .

I forgot all about that tombstone; it was not until some time later that it came back into my memory again. Any thought of it was entirely overlaid by the gradual accumulation of other data about W. H. Halford, far more interesting.

Quite honestly, I did not like him. He struck me as being sly and shifty, although at the same time he was a man of fresh original mind. He was a man of incredibly loose morals, too; at least his conversation would indicate that he was. Not that that is anything remarkable in Hollywood. I do not think we would have become the intimate friends that we did become, if I had not been fascinated by the things Halford told me about himself. Despite our common nationality, which had brought us together in the first place, I think we would have drifted apart and become mere nodding acquaintances, if Halford had not let me into his secret and if Grace Corline had not called my special attention to him.

The first time I saw him gratify a wish was over a trivial matter. Trivial — that word gives the wrong impression; he interfered with the course of Nature, but for a trivial motive. There was a beach party at Santa Monica, and an unseasonable high fog.

"I wish this fog would go away," said Halford, looking up at it casually — he and I were out on the beach together alone.

It took five minutes or so for his wish to be granted, and it happened so apparently naturally that I thought at the time that it was really natural; then came a shift in the wind, and the high fog began to break, and blue sky appeared, and soon the sun was shining down upon us. High fog comes and goes at Santa Monica, quite unpredictably, and the beach party was a

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very pleasant one in the end. Grace Corline was there, and Halford fell for her, quite obviously. He was a very susceptible man — one could hardly be long with him in Hollywood without knowing that — but women did not like him. Not because he was a gray-haired man in the middle fifties, but because his personality was definitely unpleasing to them. And Grace Corline had plenty of men to choose from, without bothering her head about Halford. She only plays bit parts, but she is as beautiful as any star, and she has brains as well. That marks her out in Hollywood society, though not necessarily favorably. Halford made a strong play for her (it was about that time that he told me he never liked the nitwit type of woman) and got nowhere. Grace's attitude towards him was one of cool amusement, which must have been peculiarly aggravating to him.

But he made some impression on her at least, for she spoke about him to me a day or two later.

"I don't like your friend Mr. Halford," she said.

"Acquaintance, not friend," I corrected. "He's only been here a month or two, you know, and I never knew him before."

"Anyway, I don't like him," repeated Grace.

A week or two later she was far more emphatic.

"I *hate* that man Halford," she said to me. "Do you know, dear, I'm almost afraid to go to a party now in case he's there. He spoils everything."

"What on earth does he do?" I asked, somewhat bewildered. I could not imagine a strong-minded woman like Grace allowing her evenings to be spoiled by a man like Halford.

"That's just the point," said Grace, and she betrayed almost as much bewilderment as I did. "He doesn't *do* a thing. Not a thing."

"You mean it's what he says?"

"He doesn't say anything, either. I wish it were. I could deal with that."

"He doesn't do anything, and he doesn't say anything? Do his looks upset you?"

"Yes," said Grace. "I — I suppose so."

"All I can say is, don't look at him then, dear."

"No, you haven't got it right," said Grace. "It isn't what he does, and it isn't what he says, and it isn't his face."

Grace had to pull herself together before she went on.

"That man," she said, solemnly, "*knows* about me."

"Knows?" I exclaimed. "What does he know? D'you mean it's blackmail or something?"

"No, not blackmail. Of course not. He just knows me, inside and out. I can feel he does."

"He hasn't that much sensitivity," I protested.

"He doesn't need it," said Grace. "He doesn't guess. *He knows!*"

"For God's sake, explain," I said.

"You'll think it's silly," said Grace. "I think it's silly, too, but I can't help it. You see, it's like this — Oh,

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I'll have to give you an example. You remember when I was married to Dick?"

"Yes."

"I was in love with him. Terribly. You remember."

"Yes, I remember," I said.

"It lasted a long time before I found him out. People used to call us an ideal couple."

"Yes."

"Well, during that time he knew all about me, of course. He could guess what I was thinking as soon as I thought it."

"Yes," I said, confining myself to agreement so as not to break the thread.

"At parties and places he'd meet my eye and smile at me across the room. You know — you see happy couples do that every day. I'd never held anything back from him, not in any way at all. Not in any way."

"Of course not," I said.

"Well," said Grace, "that man Halford knows me just as well as Dick did. I can feel it. And I hate it."

"Perhaps I'm stupid," I said, when Grace waited for my comments. "But I don't understand at all. Be a bit more explicit."

"Well," said Grace, "this will end in my having to draw you diagrams. Here's what I mean. You've heard of the undressing look?"

"Of course. But don't tell me —"

"It's worse than that. Much worse. I'm used to men trying to guess what I look like with no clothes on. But that man doesn't guess. *He knows!* He knows me as well as if I were madly in love with him and had slept with him every night for a month. If I had a birthmark somewhere — but I haven't — he'd know where it was. And that would be just nothing compared to all the other things he knows about me. About my mind, I mean. My reactions."

"My dear," I said, "do you mind if I say you're as mad as a hatter? That fellow hasn't the brains or the sense or the understanding. I'm taking it for granted that you've never admitted him to any intimacy?"

"Of course not!"

"Never? You've never been drunk or anything?"

"No, never! And if I were drunk to the point of coma I wouldn't, either."

There was no arguing Grace out of her extraordinary conviction. She was quite positive that somehow Halford enjoyed intimacy with her.

"Darn it!" she said. "That pup I bought. I got him so that he could sleep in my bedroom. Just in case —"

That clinched it, in my opinion. If a sane woman like Grace could feel like that about Halford, then Halford was worth analyzing. He was a friendless man — one can be very lonely in Hollywood — and it was not difficult for me to cultivate his friendship and his intimacy. And it called for no special tact, either. He talked freely enough when we dined together, and I saw to it that we did that fairly often. But I waited some time before I brought Grace Corline's name into the conversation.

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"Grace?" he said, when at last I mentioned her. "She's a nice girl."

Halford had gray eyes which bulged a little, rather fishy eyes. But I thought at that moment that there was a twinkle in them. A reminiscent twinkle. If he were a cad and had enjoyed Grace's favors, he might easily have looked like that. It seemed to me that after that he made a successful effort to control his expression and regain his previous indifference.

"I'd like to know her better," he said.

"Not so easy," I answered. "She's a one-man woman."

"Yes. Someone told me about that ex-husband of hers," said Halford.

That indifference he displayed was pure cunning, I was sure. But I did not report to Grace about what I thought or felt — if she had delusions, I was afraid to encourage them; and if they were not delusions I was afraid anyway. It was a relief when she told me that her tensions about Halford were easing up, and I might have left off troubling about him except that just at that moment I found out more about him. I had a dinner engagement with him for that evening, and it was too much trouble to think of a Hollywood lie to excuse my breaking it. I kept the engagement out of pure inertia, and it was only by chance that Grace's name came into the conversation again.

"Grace?" said Halford, raising his eyebrows above his bulging eyes.

This time it was real indifference. He spoke of her as a man might who was tired of her. It was a coincidence that he should do so just when Grace had told me he had ceased to trouble her thoughts. Anyway, it was all a lot of nonsense, and I was glad I did not have to give it another thought. When we emerged from the restaurant and stood under the marquee it was lashing with rain, and cold and unpleasant, and taxis were scarce. In fact, there was only one, and a youngish man was about to hand a youngish woman into it.

"Hell!" was what I said.

"I wish they'd remember something they've forgotten inside," said Halford.

The youngish woman was just stooping to enter the taxi, and at that moment she straightened up again and spoke to her escort. The two of them spoke to the doorman who was hovering beside them, and then they turned away to go back into the restaurant. The doorman looked at us.

"Yes, we'll have it," said Halford.

We got into the taxi and drove off through the rain.

"That was convenient," I said.

"Wasn't it?" said Halford.

"I'd like to know more about it," I said.

"No reason why you shouldn't, if you're interested," said Halford, and then he was silent until we swung into Hollywood Boulevard. "Here we are. Come in for a drink?"

"Thank you. I'd like to," I said.

We were at his hotel and went up to his apartment. Halford telephoned

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for whiskey and hung up my overcoat, and I was watching him very closely from my armchair. This was just the ordinary world, the world where one talked of Hooper ratings and tried to forget about the atomic bomb. It was not a world in which people performed miracles.

"How do you do it?" I asked.

"Just by wishing," said Halford, with a shrug.

"Grace Corline —" I began.

"What has Grace been telling you?" asked Halford, with a decided gleam of interest.

"You tell me first, and then I'll tell you," I countered. "That is, I'll tell you all I can without violating any promises."

At this moment the whiskey arrived, and Halford signed for it, passed mine to me, and sat himself down again. I feared the incident would distract him, but it did not. He sipped from his glass, stared into it, and went on talking, looking from the glass to me and back again.

"It started, I think, with *supposing*. Daydreaming. You know — everyone does it to some extent, according to the psychology textbooks. *Supposing* I had a million pounds. *Supposing* I wrote a bestseller."

"Yes. We all do that."

"Well, in my case it usually comes true. Within limits, that is. Pretty broad limits."

"Such as —?"

"They're not so easy to define. There's a distinction between the impossible and the possible. You remember that beach picnic at Santa Monica?"

"Yes," I said. I had forgotten all about it until he reminded me.

"Well, that's a good example. There's nothing impossible about a high fog at Santa Monica dispersing suddenly. There's nothing impossible about two people just getting into a taxi remembering that they've left something behind in a restaurant. I can't work miracles, though."

"They seem good enough miracles to me," I said.

"Do they?" said Halford, with a trace of bitterness. He held up his left hand, crippled by a wound in 1918. "I can't change this, for instance. I can't grow another little finger. I can't knock twenty years off my age, much as I'd like to."

"I understand."

"I don't think you really do. You see, I don't understand it myself. I'm learning new things about it every day. Space and time — these relativity fellows might understand, but I haven't that type of mind, and I can't change my mind any more than I can change my hand."

"But apart from that?"

"Apart from that there's nothing I can't have. Nothing."

"Grace Corline?" I asked.

"That was easy. *Supposing* she were utterly in love with me. *Supposing* — Well, with a girl like Grace that's not quite enough. You said yourself she's a one-man woman. You'd have to be her husband, and not just her secret lover. But then — then there'd be

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no limits. She'd give everything to a husband she loved. Everything! Body and soul. A very pleasant experience. It was for me, at any rate."

"I wish I knew what you are talking about," I said.

"Don't be deliberately obtuse. Grace was my wife — my passionate, devoted bride — for a very happy month. A month is long enough, of course — at least to me."

"But *when?*" I asked. "*When?*"

"Don't ask me," said Halford with a shrug. "I told you I can't work these things out. According to your calendar I suppose it started five weeks ago and ended last week. It was during my spare time, anyway. But when it actually happened is another story."

"If it ever did."

"Yes, if it ever did, I grant you." Halford shrugged again. "But it was good enough for me in any case. It was a very happy time. It's very pleasant to be able to marry and know there'll be no ill feelings afterwards."

"But why go to all that trouble?" I asked, innocently. "Why not merely wish yourself happy?"

Halford scowled a little sulkily.

"That doesn't work," he said. "I can't wish myself happy, any more than I can wish myself a new finger."

It was on the tip of my tongue, even in that unnatural moment, to suggest that was a pretty sure indication that he would never be happy anyway. But I asked a new question instead.

"Have you been able to do this all your life?" I asked.

"Oh, no. It's only been during the last few years, and at first it was very weak and feeble. I didn't even notice it for a long time. And even when I began to suspect it I put the notion away for fear I was going mad — delusions of grandeur, you know."

"I understand," I said. "I can understand that part of it."

"But I gradually became convinced," Halford went on to explain. "Actually, it was impossible not to be convinced. And as soon as I started to make use of it, I acquired greater facility. Just like touch typing. At first it was all very feeble. Getting my publishers to double their advance. That sort of thing. The set-backs I got, before I learned my limitations, shook my confidence."

"I fancy confidence has a lot to do with all this," I said.

"Yes. Undoubtedly. But it's by no means everything. What's more important is that you acquire a certain facility, as I said. I was actually frightened the first time I began to move about in space. And it's only just lately I've begun to move about in time."

"You do *that?*" I demanded.

"Yes. Oh, you needn't believe me, if you don't want to. I don't care if you do or not. But it's easy — easier than a lot of other things, if you want the truth. Those relativity fellows might explain it. Five years or half an hour — it doesn't matter."

"You could be like Marlowe's Faust, perhaps?" I suggested, hardly knowing whether I was speaking seri-

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ously or not. "Helen, make me immortal with a kiss. Cleopatra. Eve. Are you going to try them all?"

"Don't be a fool. I can only go back through my own lifetime, of course, getting younger every day."

"I thought you said you couldn't reduce your age?"

"Not permanently, of course. I'm not one of these physicists who can explain these things. I can go back and be young again. But when I come back to this, I'm that much older, all the same. Time goes on and I can't stop it. I can swim against the current, that's all."

"That's terribly interesting," I said. By this time my judgment was reversing itself. Halford was quite insane, I guessed, and I had been observing coincidences and not miracles. "Why don't you get a physicist to work on the problem? Or a psychologist, for that matter?"

"I don't want the problem solved. I'm quite happy with it as it is."

"I've a good mind to talk to Hill about it," I said.

"Well, you could," said Halford, and then he met my glance with a smile. "You talked about Helen. Good thing we're both old fogeys with a classical education, so that you'll understand the allusion. I'll make a Cassandra of you."

"How do you mean?" I asked.

"You can tell anyone you like about this," he said, "and no one will believe you. I'll fix that — there, I've fixed it already. Now go out and tell the world. Tell the *Los Angeles Examiner*, and see what they have to say about it."

"All right," I said. "You win. I won't."

"I've never wished anyone dead yet," said Halford. "Of course I could wish you a heart attack or a perforated appendix. Perhaps that would convince you?"

"I'm convinced," I said, hastily.

The truth is, I was frightened. I was glad to get away from him that evening. But I went on seeing him, of course. The temptation was overwhelming. And he told me a good deal more about himself at different times. I could recount what he told me, but much of it is not relevant, although interesting. What I think is relevant is the fact that he met Augusta Howe. I felt real jealousy when I heard about that, for I am very fond of Augusta. She is a very beautiful woman even now, a woman of wit and a woman of wisdom. Her abilities and her personality are prodigious. She was a star in the silent movie days, and she is a star still. Her fame survived that transition. It survived an even worse ordeal — in the nineteen-twenties a jealous husband caught her with a lover whom he killed in her arms, and even that awful scandal did not wreck her career, although smaller scandals at that time wrecked careers almost as distinguished. People have forgotten about it nowadays, at least for most of the time, and when they happen to remember, it is no serious disadvantage; on the contrary, she is still talked about as "The Grand Old

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Lady of the Stage and Screen," and most people think she must be a sexagenarian — of course, she is nothing of the sort; but it adds to her popularity that people think so.

All this is a digression; the point is that Halford met her. He talked about her to me later.

"I wouldn't like anything to upset Augusta," I said.

"Don't worry," said Halford. "Why should anything upset her?"

When I continued to appear apprehensive he tried to reassure me.

"Whatever's going to happen will happen a long time ago, so to speak," he said with a grin. "She's a wonderful old lady. *Supposing* . . . . I expect she was much more wonderful when she was thirty. She must have been marvelous then."

So marvelous that one man killed another for her . . . but I did not pursue the subject. We talked after that about the impermanence of happiness — not a subject that Halford knew much about, for he, I firmly believe, had never known happiness at all, even momentarily. And that was the last time I ever talked to Halford, and it was almost the last time that anyone ever did, for next day he disappeared.

He vanished completely from this life.

He left everything just as it was in his hotel apartment — his clothes, his books, his manuscripts. He left his money in the bank. We waited to hear if some sudden whim had taken him back to England, but we heard nothing at all. Nothing.

No one has ever heard a word from Halford since that time. . . .

It was only a short while ago that it occurred to me that there was a tombstone in the cemetery with his name on it, and the date 1925. Augusta was thirty in 1925, and it was just at that time that someone was killed in her arms. I have the ridiculous feeling that if that grave were to be opened, the skeleton inside would have a mutilated left hand — with the little finger missing. . . .

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE has in stock a supply of strong, handsome binders for your copies of *EQMM*. Each binder holds one complete volume — that is, six issues of the magazine. It is easy to use, handy, convenient and economical. The price is $1.50 postpaid. Send your order and remittance to: Special Binder Dept., Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, 570 Lexington Ave., New York 22, New York.

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We have discovered an English writer who is virtually unknown to American readers. Meet Mr. L. J. Beeston. Unless we are enormously mistaken, you will always cherish this first meeting in print; unless, after all these years, we don't know a born storyteller from a bag of dried-up bones, you will ask for more and more of Mr. Beeston's tales of crime and detection and derring-do.

L. J. Beeston was born in a mean district of London, close to Oxford Street. His chief memories of his first home are a battered copy of Mayne Reid's THE SCALP HUNTERS *and a vendor of baked potatoes who had his pitch opposite the Beeston house. To this day Mr. Beeston remembers that vendor's repeated cry: "All hot and floury!"— a cry so unhappy that it seemed to be the wailing of a lost soul over a past sin.*

Later, Mr. Beeston became an employee of the firm of Cassell & Company, publishers, and the reading of short stories for one of Cassell's magazines inspired Mr. Beeston to become a writer. He felt that he could at least do better than the worst.

Now, it is a curious thing that Mr. Beeston never wrote anything but short stories. Were his efforts successful from the start? Why, yes. Does that mean that his stories were good from the start? Why, no. Mr. Beeston himself claims they were bad; but he was possessed of a tremendous enthusiasm, and that zest, that gusto, illumined even his earliest tales. It is what Mr. Beeston calls "a faith which moves editors."

More about the author when we comment on some of his other stories . . . But we are convinced that L. J. Beeston is one of the great unsung sheer-storytellers of our time. The first tale we bring you by Mr. Beeston (and there are at least five more to follow) is an adventure in the classic tradition of twist-and-turn ingenuity, sparkling imagination, and edge-of-your-seat suspense . . .

THE PIPE

by L. J. BEESTON

LESTROVA entered his furnished flat at seven o'clock and dropped into a chair as if his backbone had suddenly snapped. His spirit was low.

"So much for afternoon bridge—my afternoon bridge," he sighed. "It would have discredited a dustman; it was as elementary as a nebula, and

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probably not as important. It has separated me from more money than I care to think about this side of bedtime. And as I signed away twice as much, last weekend, at Sir William Wildly's house party, it becomes obvious that I must either play bridge better or —— Hullo! What untidy devil has been here?"

In front of him was a writing-desk with four drawers on either side. Each of these receptacles was open, and a lower one had been pulled out right upon the carpet. Lestrova reached out to press the bell.

"Bowls!" he called.

"Don't touch it," begged a courteous voice. "As a matter of fact, however, your servant is not in."

Lestrova stared. He had excellent reason. At three yards of distance, across the desk, the narrow circle of a revolver was leveled at the space between his eyes. The man who held it, resting the weapon in the crook of his left arm, looked through two holes in a strip of black calico across the upper part of his face.

There was a silence of four seconds; then Lestrova ventured to breathe again. Mechanically he glanced towards the door, which was behind him, and he saw a second man, who also had his eyes hidden, though he showed no menace of a leveled pistol.

"Ah!" said Lestrova. "Who the devil, gentlemen, are you?"

"A natural question, Mr. Lestrova," said the man with the pistol, and who maintained most of the dialogue which followed. "And put with a coolness which, the circumstances considered, prophesies well for the success of this interview. If I believed your manner to be flippant, I should preface what I have to say with a word of intense warning; but I think you understand that death may be very close to you at this moment."

Lestrova nodded. "'May be' has a hopeful note," he answered. "Am I to assume that that half-mask conceals the identity of a face known to me?"

"You have never seen me in your life. However, I am not here to answer questions, but to ask them. You spent the weekend just past at the house of Sir William Wildly, in Kent?"

"That is an affirmation, and a correct one."

"You played bridge on the Saturday night, and you played again on the Sunday night. You showed your usual skill ——"

"Pardon, I played execrably."

"But the luck of the cards was against you; you were unfortunate in your partner ——"

"Houseman? Oh, Houseman handles his cards like a master; finesses like an ambassador."

"And, play being high, you lost much more money than you could afford to lose. Shall I mention the sum?"

"Pray do not. It is a sore point."

"You went down to 'Redpines,' Sir William's country house, on Saturday afternoon. You went in your car, and your servant Bowls, who sometimes drives your car, drove it on this occasion. You arrived at about five

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o'clock, and your servant put up himself, and the car, at the closeby inn called *The Twin Lobsters.*"

"You are a model of exactitude," said Lestrova, putting up his heels on the desk.

"I will come now to the night of the Sunday. Play ceased early, at about eleven, when the ladies soon retired. There were left — but perhaps you will tell me who were left."

"Why should I?"

"I invite a little frankness."

"Forgive me, but where are we drifting? To what goal?"

"Answer my question."

Lestrova reflected. "Who remained? Why, there was Draper with a novel; Houseman, making up a crossword puzzle for the paper which pays him for such perplexities; Sieveking at the piano — with Houseman, brain-tortured, hurling glances of hate in his direction; and, lastly, there was Goldring telling young Brown that the next world war will come five weeks before Christmas, and civilization will explode just after Easter. That's all."

"You have not mentioned yourself."

"Oh, that was the lot I left when I went to roost."

"Yes, you went first; but not to bed. You walked your room for a full hour; your losses were on your nerves ——"

"Pardon again. They should have been, but they were not."

"At two o'clock, when everyone was asleep, you left your room for the balcony on which it opens."

Lestrova raised admiring brows. "Can a man not take a breath of fresh morning air?"

"You followed the length of the balcony, which passes three other rooms. At the extreme end is Lady Wildly's dressing-room. You were there lost sight of, owing to the foliage of an elm tree, the branches of which touch the balcony at that point. You came into view a few minutes later, returned to your own room, and did not leave it until the morning."

The speaker stopped, as if that was the end of the first chapter in a dramatic story.

"This is dull hearing," commented Lestrova. "May I light a cigarette, sir?"

"Keep your hands still, or you die where you sit. There is an element of mocking in your replies which is a danger to you. You know perfectly well the ultimate end of my observations, which I have made merely with a view to showing you how closely we have watched you."

"Yes, I feel that I know what you are driving at — now," Lestrova answered. "I saw the news in tonight's paper. Someone got into Lady Wildly's room and stole an article of jewelry: a diamond pendant. Am I serious enough for you now?"

"That is better. Well?"

"Well what?"

"What have you got to say about it?"

"About the jewel? Why, that its beauty might well provide tempta-

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tion. A single rose-cut diamond with a blue gleam in its heart. Lady Wildly wore it in rather a curious fashion: unset, save for a tiny claw at the end of a thin platinum chain."

"You are beginning to trifle again. Be very careful!"

Lestrova fixed a steady look upon his interlocutor. "I see," he replied, slowly. "You believe I helped myself to the jewel."

"Unquestionably."

"My movements on that night, coupled with my card debts ——"

"Which are but a part of your debts."

"True, very true. Yes. I see the situation. You and your friend here are jewel crooks; the two of you are possibly members of a confederacy of jewel crooks. Your system of espionage is, doubtless, a part of your methods — of the delicate webs you weave in which rare jewels are caught. You had perfected plans to obtain the very valuable gem in question, and its disappearance in the hour when your hand was almost literally outstretched to grasp it naturally was very disconcerting. I perceive now the meaning of the disturbance in my rooms, in which you have been making a search. But I did not take Lady Wildly's pendant; and I assure you that I know nothing whatever about it."

"That is a lie."

"Well?"

"Our search has been efficient. We have not found the diamond in your rooms. Your movements since that night are known to us, and we are aware that you have not disposed of it. Therefore, it is on your person."

"No."

"Are you going to repeat that word?"

The answer, "I must," rose to Lestrova's lips. He checked it, for a sparkle in the eyes behind the mask told him that he was on the very edge of annihilation.

"Think again," went on the other. "I can give you a few minutes; I can give you ten. If, at the expiration of that time, you have not placed the diamond in my possession, I shall blow out your brains."

"Ah," said Lestrova, "I see that you will. That is a grim fact which I grasp entirely."

And he took his heels off the desk.

What to do? Lestrova leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes. A passing surprise at his own coolness flitted through his brain. He could not dwell upon that, however. What he needed now was white-hot concentration. He appeared to be impelled along a passage which had a dead end. If it did have a dead end, then he was lost. But if there was the faintest way out he must not miss it; he must not let a flustered nerve rob him of decades of years.

That might happen so easily. Ten minutes more of life! Half an hour ago he had been playing bridge at his club in Piccadilly and had walked home in tip-top health, enjoying the evening sunshine and the company of the shopping crowds. Sounds of the voices and footsteps of those crowds

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came to him through his windows, and the pleasant hum of motor traffic. In ten minutes' time a bullet could crash into his brain.

Lestrova realized this perfectly. He indulged not the slenderest hope that the men in his room would not push their threat to its extreme end. The glitter of the eyes watching him, the composure of the voice which had been speaking to him, showed no weakness of purpose.

He said to himself:

"If I give them this diamond I shall go out — a live man. But I haven't got it. I never did have it. Well, in that case my only hope is in finding it for them. That will want a bit of doing. It is a large order. A smart detective might find it, but even he would want time. He would want ten days — ten weeks, perhaps; and I have only ten minutes — not that, now. I can understand their idea that I nipped in before them and grabbed the jewel. The case against me, from their point of view, is a strong case. But if I am innocent, someone else is guilty. Now, which member of the house party — ah! yes, yes!"

Suddenly Lestrova had recalled something; he now fastened upon it with an intentness that held him rigid with concentration. . . .

"You have five minutes," remarked the ominous voice.

Lestrova did not hear. His mind was working as it had never done.

"Three minutes!"

Lestrova's lips moved, but he was speaking to himself. . . .

"Two!"

"Yes, yes," murmured Lestrova to himself. "I must prove the ownership."

"One minute!"

Lestrova opened his eyes.

"Don't make so much noise," he said, quietly. "You shall have the diamond. I believe that I know who took it, and I'll get it for you."

"Fool! Do you hope to put me off in that fashion?"

"I am not putting you off. You shall have the diamond; you shall have it before you leave this room. Isn't that what you wanted? Shoot if you like, but listen to me first."

The two men exchanged a glance.

"Do you believe I would allow myself to be murdered for the sake of a jewel which I couldn't take with me?" went on Lestrova. "Listen. There was one small happening that night which your confederate — who, I take it, was down in the garden seeing that the coast was clear — did not perceive. It was this: on my way down the balcony I struck my foot against something. It was just outside Lady Wildly's dressing-room. It was a briar pipe. As I picked it up I noticed that the bowl was faintly warm. I feel that this pipe is going to help us. There it is, on my desk. Graciously permit me to examine it."

Lestrova put out a hand for it. The absolute steadiness of his demeanor was helping him.

"Your first thought," he continued, "will be that the pipe is mine. It is not. I never smoke a pipe. I should like to,

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but have never been able to form the habit. If you doubt me, look through these rooms and find, if you can, a pipe of any sort, or loose tobacco of any kind; or search my pockets. But your investigation has already proved my statement. Luckily I slipped this pipe into a pocket, meaning to seek its owner on the following morning, but it slipped my memory. It has been on my desk since.

"I was not the only one outside Lady Wildly's room that night. Someone else had been there a trifle of time before me. He dropped this pipe. Let us get after him, therefore. I say let *us* get after him, for I am perfectly willing and eager to help you find the diamond; it belongs to Lady Wildly, but — my life belongs to me.

"It all boils down to one question, which is: 'Who is the owner of this pipe?' I propose to find him, and to force the diamond from him — while you wait. If you think I am trifling, press that trigger; but you will not find the jewel on my body, and the consequences to yourself will be disagreeable.

"I have told you that when I retired I left the other men — Draper with his novel, Houseman with his crossword puzzle, Sieveking with his music, Goldring and young Brown talking politics. Brown can at once be eliminated; he smokes only cigarettes. That leaves four, and they all are pipe smokers, as I know. How can I tell to which one this pipe belongs? Examination and reasoning may furnish an answer to the question."

With an assurance that was far more assumed than real, Lestrova pulled his chair up to the writing-desk and leaned forward over the pipe in close investigation. That his life trembled on a hair's-breadth balance he knew perfectly well. He had quite a good clue, and a good deal might be done with it — if he had time in which to get his hearers interested. If his coolness had shaken the others' conviction as to his having the jewel actually upon him or near him, then a shred of hope remained. They might listen to him; they might give him time at least in which to make an attempt to locate the prize. On that all depended.

"At the least sign of hesitation, of lack of confidence, out goes my light," ran Lestrova's thought.

A certain cold sensation in the center of his bowed head came hard upon the idea that it was at that point the bullet would lodge.

He continued, with deliberation:

"I have no difficulty in crossing out Sieveking's name from the four remaining. This is a well-seasoned pipe; it has either been in use for a considerable period or has been smoked a great deal. Sieveking could not smoke a strong pipe like this; he has not the head or the nerves; it would make him sick. I rule out the delicate Sieveking.

"That leaves us Houseman, Draper, and Goldring. We are closing in."

Lestrova breathed more freely. The chilled sensation in the middle of his head began to die away.

"The next name for elimination is

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Draper's," he continued. "You will see that the extreme end of the mouthpiece is almost bitten through. The smoker has not only a strong head, he has strong teeth. Now I know for a fact that Draper has artificial teeth. They are apparent when he laughs heartily. Now a smoker who has a dental plate hardly marks the stem of his pipe, and never bites it through. He could not if he tried. He has not the jaw-power."

He still lived. His perfect nerve, or his reasoning, might yet get him out of the pit. He felt that the second man had stepped farther into the room and was watching his movements and harkening to his words.

"This leaves us with the names of Goldring and Houseman," went on Lestrova, turning the pipe round and round, speaking from the depths of deduction. "One of these two is the owner of this piece of damning evidence. Which one? Both have strong heads; both have sound teeth. This was an expensive pipe; it is of the finest French briar root; but that does not assist us, for both those men can afford a decent pipe."

Still he turned it about in his fingers, not hurrying.

Suddenly he went on:

"And yet I find that still closer investigation will bring us to a final choice. The user of the pipe has not treated it as its super-quality demanded. It betrays an element of human carelessness. The bowl is deliberately encrusted with deposit; and worse — much worse — the fore part of the edge has been to some degree burned away. The user clearly filled it with spirit at one time, for cleaning purposes, and allowed the spirit to set fire to the edge of his pipe. This not merely evinces a certain carelessness on the owner's part, it shows ill-treatment and lack of proper fastidiousness, for no one who loves his pipe taints it by burning spirit in the bowl — and methylated spirit, too, for the smell still lingers.

"Now I am quite sure that Goldring is not the man to maltreat an expensive briar in that fashion. He is more than fastidious: he is finicky; extreme tidiness is one of his strong — or weak — points. On the other hand, Houseman is markedly Bohemian in his habits, and in this regard is a typical contrast to Goldring. Beyond question, this pipe could never belong to the latter. We find, therefore, by a simple process of elimination, that Houseman is the owner. That being so, it must have been Houseman who was prowling on the balcony that night. The assumption is not weakened by the fact that his financial status is probably the least robust of the men we have discussed; his work is painfully hard, and his responsibilities are many."

Lestrova had finished. He ran a finger up and down the stem.

The man behind him, who had hitherto kept silent, said:

"It may belong to Sir William Wildly."

"No. Sir William smokes cigars only — at half a crown apiece."

"Or to one of the servants."

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"No. The servants have a wing to themselves, and one of them would not come smoking a pipe to steal a jewel from his mistress's room. The act was not premeditated. Temptation suddenly loomed up before the smoker, and he yielded on impulse."

A long silence ensued. Lestrova did not look up. He knew that the men were exchanging questioning glances, deciding his immediate fate.

"If they doubt that I have the diamond," he said to himself, "they may snatch at a chance of getting it."

Suddenly he who had done all the talking commenced again.

"There is probably nothing whatever in what you have said," he remarked, dissatisfied and suspicious. "But if it were true, if Houseman has the pendant, how can you make good your boast and force it from him?"

"Quite easily. He will take instant fright, and will readily let go — on terms of safety to himself."

"It will take time."

"Minutes only. I will send him a letter."

"A letter?"

"Yes, and so worded that it will attain your object, and mine, and give no subsequent trouble to anyone. You can send it to him by your friend here. His address in the Charing Cross Road is scarcely five minutes' walk. In double that time you shall have the diamond."

From a leather case on the desk Lestrova produced a sheet of notepaper. He commenced to write, pausing at intervals for reflection. When he had finished he handed it across, observing quietly, "That will hit the mark. It will make him deadly afraid. Remember, it was an act of impulse. He will let go of the jewel as if it were a cobra."

Please give — asking no questions — to the bearer of this letter, who is sent to you by your friend Lestrova (who is acting for the owner), the trinket in which you showed unfortunate interest. No charge involving any unpleasantness will follow an effectual and instant restoration.

By the time that Lestrova's visitors had finished reading the letter he had addressed an envelope.

"Send Houseman that note and you will get your diamond — or, rather, Lady Wildly's diamond," said he.

The men drew aside a step or two, whispering together. The fellow with the pistol kept his eyes fixed on Lestrova, who was now venturing a cigarette. He growled:

"You seem very sure about it."

"I am absolutely certain."

"All right; but understand that I do not intend to go away without what I came for."

"You shall go away with the diamond in your pocket."

"I hope so — for your sake." He whispered again to his companion, handed him the letter, and the man vanished.

"Take a cigarette," said Lestrova.

The visitor accepted, lighting it with his left hand. He pulled a chair to the writing-desk, opposite Lestrova, and sat down, crossing his knees. He kept his weapon leveled on Les-

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trova and maintained a sullen silence.

"You might now put that thing aside," suggested Lestrova, pleasantly. "A loaded revolver never looks kindly, I think."

There was no reply.

"I must congratulate myself on picking up that pipe, and still more in neglecting to restore it."

"That remains to be seen."

"Oh, I am without doubt."

"A quarter of an hour has passed."

"That is not much."

"But you said ten minutes."

"Approximately. I had forgotten the evening traffic."

Another spell of silence followed, during which Lestrova helped himself to a second cigarette. His visitor, by an almost imperceptible fidgeting, betrayed a growing uneasiness. At last he exclaimed:

"By thunder, this has gone far enough!"

With but a fraction of a second between him and the dark, Lestrova answered, unexcitedly:

"All right. I keep my promise. *The diamond is here!*"

He put out his hand for the pipe, picked up a little silver paper knife on the desk, inserted the point in the bowl, jerked out a wad of tobacco, and shook into his palm Lady Wildly's missing jewel.

"Take it," smiled Lestrova.

The visitor was not slow to accept. So near had he been to the edge of murder that his fingers trembled and his breathing made a husky sound. He examined the stone feverishly.

"That satisfies you?" chuckled Lestrova. "Pardon me if I indulged a human weakness by putting off this big moment till the very last. I caught a glimpse of the diamond in the bowl of the pipe while I was examining it. Until then I had not the least idea of its presence. Obviously, the purloiner tugged it clean away from the delicate setting of the chain. He showed hasty action — the result of inexperience. He thrust it into his pipe, which was not a bad hiding place, jabbed in a bit of tobacco, and cleared out. Unluckily for himself, his flustered nerves affected his movements, for, instead of dropping the pipe into his pocket as he made his exit, he, without being aware of the fact, let it fall upon the balcony, where I found it. All that is very apparent."

The eyes behind the mask flashed with triumph.

"I see, I see!" cried their owner, permitting himself the relaxation of a grin. "And Houseman is still searching frantically for his pipe — this pipe."

"Not he!" laughed Lestrova.

"What do you mean?"

"Why, it is not his pipe! Never was. Never will be. Dear old Houseman wouldn't steal the head off a pin."

"Oh, he wouldn't, would he? Then what sort of game —"

"Listen. It is packed with interest. The ownership of that pipe was known to me this morning, when I first gave it more than a casual glance. Why,

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then, did I try to fix it upon my friend Houseman? That is easily answered. Because I wanted to gain time. As I said, I had no idea that the diamond was inside the briar until I had pursued my investigation and deductions for some time; and then I went on with both for two reasons: one, because I found it amusing and instructive — and you must allow that my logic was not at all bad, and might have earned a name for a police sleuth. My second reason — but that can wait a moment. You are bursting to know to whom this pipe really belongs. To my servant."

"Bowls!"

"Exactly. I have been keeping it for him, but he is missing. We can understand why, can we not? He apparently took fright when he discovered his loss; he dreaded his pipe being found, with the stolen diamond in it. I knew it was his because I gave it to him myself last Christmas. There is a little disc in the mouthpiece which is the trademark of a certain firm of makers; that, and the shape, and the fact that I have seen him clean it with methylated spirit, made me recognize it. The rascal must have left his nest at *The Twin Lobsters*, scaled the balcony at Lady Wildly's house, and pinched the pendant. You know so much about my affairs that I suspect you have used him as a fount of information. But it seems that you should have watched *him* since the theft, not me. However, you have the diamond. Are you content?"

"Yes. You talk like a cool one, and you think you are pretty smart don't you —"

"I do! I do!"

"But you were within a hair's-breadth of overreaching yourself. Instead of wasting your time by writing and sending that letter ——"

"Ah, wait — wait! I have not given you my second reason for writing. By deduction I made the pipe *seem* to belong to Houseman. That was important. I told you that he ekes out a living by devising crossword puzzles for newspapers. He is marvelous at that kind of stunt. Now, that note I sent him. You observed that it took me some time and thought to fashion it. Well, as he never had the diamond, the letter must have seemed, on a first reading, like Greek to him; and then, instinctively, he would peer into it for a hidden meaning, an enigma, scenting one of his everlasting word-puzzles like a dog a rat. And there it was, staring him in the face: the oldest and simplest of acrostics: the first letter in each line forming one word — the fatal word — *Police!* My cry for help! Did he rise to the occasion? Yes, by heaven he did! Down with that pistol! For a whole minute two police officers have been at the open door behind you!"

The fellow spun round; there was a wild and ineffectual shot, and the crash of his body as the officers bore him down.

"I win!" roared Lestrova. "Hullo, Houseman! You, too? Good lad! Good lad!"

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DETECTIVE DIRECTORY

edited by ROBERT P. MILLS

NO TEARS FOR HILDA *by ANDREW GARVE* (HARPER, $2.50)	"The suspense in this unemphatic . . . novel is wonderfully sustained." (LGO)	". . . a splendid portrait of a murderee . . . breathlessly exciting." (HT)
NEVER FIGHT A LADY *by SELDON TRUSS* (CRIME CLUB, $2.50)	". . . don't miss this one for all-around competence and charm." (LGO)	"A thin . . . plot . . . none of the wit one has come to expect of this author." (HT)
THE FOLLOWER *by PATRICK QUENTIN* (SIMON & SCHUSTER, $2.50)	"Neatly plotted and expertly written, but in some odd way not much like Patrick Quentin." (LGO)	". . . a shift of character . . . keeps the suspense going to the very end." (HT)
A DAISY CHAIN FOR SATAN *by JOAN FLEMING* (CRIME CLUB, $2.50)	". . . lots of charm, though the style is a bit too leisurely for the dramatic content." (LGO)	". . . civilized . . . but not built up with sufficient subtlety to carry its theme." (HT)
MURDER FOR THE HOLIDAYS *by HOWARD RIGSBY* (MORROW, $2.50)	". . . background is authentic, the style crisp . . . the pace consistently fast." (LGO)	". . . sound deduction. . . . Smooth and fast." (HT)
THE CONGO VENUS *by MATTHEW HEAD* (SIMON & SCHUSTER, $2.50)	". . . the mystery is rightly subordinated to a vital and brilliant story of human beings." (LGO)	". . . excellent portrayal of a bourgeois Belgian family living in the Congo." (HT)
DREAM SINISTER *by STURGES MASON SCHLEY* (MORROW, $2.50)	"The events sound fairly improbable, but make lively reading." (LGO)	"A colorful and well written mystery . . . tremendous suspense." (HT)
THE SILENT PARTNER *by KATHLEEN MOORE KNIGHT* (CRIME CLUB, $2.50)	"The solution is fairly surprising but the rest is pretty tough going." (LGO)	". . . conventional characters in a completely conventional story." (HT)

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A new column, rounding up the judgment of reviewers across the country. The key on the right gives sources.

". . . top suspense without exclamation points. A honey." (JL)	"Done with a good deal of smack and diversity." (JS)	
"Writing excellent . . . plot's . . . involvements improbable, but . . . suspense . . . tops." (JL)	". . . delightful blend of British charm . . . with American tempo and action . . . joyously readable." (AB)	
"A sleek piece of calculation in steadily reversed odds, thriller rather than detective story." (JS)	". . . completely incredible item . . . our dopey hero does it the hard and reasonless way." (DBH)	
"Mystery sacrificed to character and atmosphere . . . but tops in intelligence." (JL)	". . . pleasant English atmosphere, attractive characters . . . neat, suspense-filled plot." (HM)	
"Smoking-wisecrack-and-gun school with more sense than most. . . . Exciting — but synthetic." (JL)	". . . pretty drab and hackneyed — despite one really neat plot twist in solution." (AB)	
"An exciting lot of people . . . sharply observant prose . . . colloquial and literate." (JS)	"Matthew Head . . . can always be counted on to provide excitement in both plot and style." (DBH)	
"Pretentious, but better than most." (JL)	". . . smoothly written . . . a well above average thriller." (HM)	
". . . writing literate . . . complications far-fetched . . . Good average job." (JL)	". . . frequently clumsy plotting . . . Yet . . . agreeable readability." (AB)	

KEY TO REVIEW SOURCES

AB: *Anthony Boucher in The New York Times*

DBH: *Dorothy B. Hughes in The Los Angeles Daily News*

HM: *Hillis Mills in The New York Times*

HT: *Unsigned review in The New York Herald Tribune*

JL: *Judge Lynch in The Saturday Review of Literature*

JS: *James Sandoe*

LGO: *Lenore Glen Offord in The San Francisco Chronicle*

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WHAT HAS ALREADY HAPPENED

Sir Reuben Astwell has been murdered, his body found in the Tower room of his estate, Mon Repos, in Abbots Cross. Investigation by Inspector Miller has resulted in the arrest of Charles Leverson, the victim's nephew, but Lady Astwell is convinced of the nephew's innocence. Lady Astwell is a woman of positive and unchangeable opinions: she realizes that she is not clever, but she has unlimited faith in her intuition, and that God-given power tells her that Sir Reuben's secretary, Owen Trefusis, is the real murderer. Although she has no evidence whatever to back up her conviction of Trefusis's guilt, Lady Astwell sends her paid companion, Lily Margrave, to visit Hercule Poirot ten days after the murder and ask the famous Belgian sleuth to exercise his "little gray cells" in Leverson's behalf. Poirot notes, however, that Lily Margrave obviously does not have her heart in the assignment. Indeed, it is Lily's very adroitness in discouraging Poirot that causes Poirot to make up his mind — to take the case.

At Mon Repos, Poirot questions Lady Astwell and learns that she just knows *Charles didn't do it and that Trefusis did; also, that Victor Astwell, the dead man's brother and business partner, who has recently returned from West Africa, is a man of violent temper. Poirot remembers that Lily Margrave had failed even to mention Victor Astwell. Poirot questions Parsons the butler, then Trefusis, who shows Poirot the Tower room where the murder took place. The Tower room has only one door, but inside the room there is a small spiral stairway leading to the tower above, which Sir Reuben had fitted up as a bedroom; however, there is no other entrance to or exit from this small tower bedroom.*

With George his valet, Poirot re-enacts the murder; then having learned that Lily wore a light green chiffon dress the night of the crime, Poirot through a ruse obtains a fragment of the dress. His next move is a strange one: he pricks his finger and puts his own blood on the small piece of chiffon. At this moment Victor Astwell returns from an overnight stay in London and Poirot hurries to meet him. Their talk reveals that Victor had waited up in his room the night of the murder to speak with Leverson, thus having the main staircase to the Tower room under constant observation for the period in which the murder must have been committed. This gives

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Trefusis an alibi, since Victor would have seen him had Trefusis come down from his own bedroom and entered the Tower room during the murder period. So much for Lady Astwell's intuition!

Next, Poirot visits two local hotels and learns that a Captain Humphrey Naylor had been staying at one of them and had been out of the hotel during the time the murder was committed. This information decides Poirot on his next move. He finds Lily Margrave, hears her repeat that she was not at any time during the murder night in the Tower room; then Poirot shows Lily the scrap of green chiffon — stained with Poirot's own blood — and calmly informs the girl that he found it on the scene of the crime! Lily begins to change her story, but Poirot points out that the blood on the scrap proves Lily must have been in the Tower room after the crime was committed — at which the girl gasps: "How did you find out?"

"No matter, Mademoiselle. I tell you Hercule Poirot knows. *I know all about Captain Humphrey Naylor, and that you went down to meet him that night."*

Hercule Poirot, of the amazing ingenuity and aplomb, is bluffing pure and simple — but what does he really *know? Read the concluding installment and learn who murdered Sir Reuben with "some heavy instrument" . . .*

THE UNDER DOG: Part Two (*Conclusion*)

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

LILY suddenly put her head down on her arms and burst into tears. Immediately Poirot relinquished his accusing attitude.

"There, there, my little one," he said, patting the girl on the shoulder. "Do not distress yourself. Impossible to deceive Hercule Poirot; once realize that and all your troubles will be at an end. And now you will tell me the whole story, will you not? You will tell old Papa Poirot?"

"It is not what you think, it isn't, indeed. Humphrey — my brother — never touched a hair of his head."

"Your brother, eh?" said Poirot. "So that is how the land lies. Well, if you wish to save him from suspicion, you must tell me the whole story now, without reservations."

Lily sat up again, pushing back the hair from her forehead. After a minute or two, she began to speak in a low, clear voice.

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"I will tell you the truth, M. Poirot. I can see now that it would be absurd to do anything else. My real name is Lily Naylor, and Humphrey is my only brother. Some years ago, when he was out in Africa, he discovered a gold mine, or rather, I should say, discovered the presence of gold. I can't tell you this part of it properly, because I don't understand the technical details, but what it amounted to was this:

"The thing seemed likely to be a very big undertaking, and Humphrey came home with letters to Sir Reuben Astwell in the hopes of getting him interested in the matter. I don't understand the rights of it even now, but I gather that Sir Reuben sent out an expert to report, and that he subsequently told my brother that the expert's report was unfavorable and that he, Humphrey, had made a great mistake. My brother went back to Africa on an expedition into the interior and was lost sight of. It was assumed that he and the expedition had perished.

"It was soon after that that a company was formed to exploit the Mpala Gold Fields. When my brother got back to England he at once jumped to the conclusion that these gold fields were identical with those he had discovered. Sir Reuben Astwell had apparently nothing to do with this company, and they had seemingly discovered the place on their own. But my brother was not satisfied; he was convinced that Sir Reuben had deliberately swindled him.

"He became more and more violent and unhappy about the matter. We two are alone in the world, M. Poirot, and as it was necessary then for me to go out and earn my own living, I conceived the idea of taking a post in this household and trying to find out if any connection existed between Sir Reuben and the Mpala Gold Fields. For obvious reasons I concealed my real name, and I'll admit frankly that I used a forged reference.

"There were many applicants for the post, most of them with better qualifications than mine, so — well, M. Poirot, I wrote a beautiful letter from the Duchess of Perthshire, who I knew had just gone to America. I thought a Duchess would have a great effect upon Lady Astwell, and I was quite right. She engaged me on the spot.

"Since then I have been that hateful thing, a spy, and until lately with no success. Sir Reuben is not a man to give away his business secrets, but when Victor Astwell came back from Africa he was less guarded in his talk, and I began to believe that, after all, Humphrey had not been mistaken. My brother came down here about a fortnight before the murder, and I crept out of the house to meet him secretly at night. I told him the things Victor Astwell had said, and he became very excited and assured me I was definitely on the right track.

"But after that things began to go wrong; someone must have seen me

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stealing out of the house and have reported the matter to Sir Reuben. He became suspicious and hunted up my references, and soon discovered the fact that they were forged. The crisis came on the day of the murder. I think he thought I was after his wife's jewels. Whatever his suspicions were, he had no intention to allow me to remain any longer at Mon Repos, though he agreed not to prosecute me on account of the references. Lady Astwell took my part throughout and stood up valiantly to Sir Reuben."

She paused. Poirot's face was very grave.

"And now, Mademoiselle," he said, "we come to the night of the murder."

Lily swallowed hard and nodded her head.

"To begin with, M. Poirot, I must tell you that my brother had come down again, and that I had arranged to creep out and meet him once more. I went up to my room, as I have said, but I did not go to bed. Instead, I waited till I thought everyone was asleep, and then stole downstairs again and out by the side door. I met Humphrey and acquainted him in a few hurried words with what had occurred. I told him that I believed the papers he wanted were in Sir Reuben's safe in the Tower room, and we agreed as a last desperate adventure to try and get hold of them that night.

"I was to go in first and see that the way was clear. I heard the church clock strike twelve as I went in by the side door. I was halfway up the stairs leading to the Tower room, when I heard a thud of something falling, and a voice cried out, 'My God!' A minute or two afterward the door of the Tower room opened, and Charles Leverson came out. I could see his face quite clearly in the moonlight, but I was crouching some way below him on the stairs where it was dark, and he did not see me at all.

"He stood there a moment swaying on his feet and looking ghastly. He seemed to be listening; then with an effort he seemed to pull himself together and, opening the door into the Tower room, called out something about there being no harm done. His voice was quite jaunty and debonair, but his face gave the lie to it. He waited a minute more, and then slowly went on upstairs and out of sight.

"When he had gone I waited a minute or two and then crept to the Tower room door. I had a feeling that something tragic had happened. The main light was out, but the desk lamp was on, and by its light I saw Sir Reuben lying on the floor by the desk. I don't know how I managed it, but I nerved myself at last to go over and kneel down by him. I saw at once that he was dead, struck down from behind, and also that he couldn't have been dead long; I touched his hand and it was still quite warm. It was just horrible, M. Poirot. Horrible!"

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She shuddered again at the remembrance.

"And then?" said Poirot, looking at her keenly.

Lily Margrave nodded.

"Yes, M. Poirot, I know what you are thinking. Why didn't I give the alarm and raise the house? I should have done so, I know, but it came over me in a flash, as I knelt there, that my quarrel with Sir Reuben, my stealing out to meet Humphrey, the fact that I was being sent away on the morrow, made a fatal sequence. They would say that I had let Humphrey in, and that Humphrey had killed Sir Reuben out of revenge. If I said that I had seen Charles Leverson leaving the room, no one would believe me.

"It was terrible, M. Poirot! I knelt there, and thought and thought, and the more I thought the more my nerve failed me. Presently I noticed Sir Reuben's keys which had dropped from his pocket as he fell. Among them was the key of the safe, the combination word I already knew, since Lady Astwell had mentioned it once in my hearing. I went over to that safe, M. Poirot, unlocked it and rummaged through the papers I found there.

"In the end I found what I was looking for. Humphrey had been perfectly right. Sir Reuben was behind the Mpala Gold Fields, and he had deliberately swindled Humphrey. That made it all the worse. It gave a perfectly definite motive for Humphrey having committed the crime. I put the papers back in the safe, left the key in the door of it, and went straight upstairs to my room. In the morning I pretended to be surprised and horror-stricken, like everyone else, when the housemaid discovered the body."

She stopped and looked piteously across at Poirot.

"You do believe me, M. Poirot. Oh, do say you believe me!"

"I believe you, Mademoiselle," said Poirot; "you have explained many things that puzzled me. Your absolute certainty, for one thing, that Charles Leverson had committed the crime, and at the same time your persistent efforts to keep me from coming down here."

Lily nodded.

"I was afraid of you," she admitted frankly. "Lady Astwell could not know, as I did, that Charles was guilty, and I couldn't say anything. I hoped against hope that you would refuse to take the case."

"But for that obvious anxiety on your part, I might have done so," said Poirot dryly.

Lily looked at him swiftly, her lips trembled a little.

"And now, M. Poirot, what — what are you going to do?"

"As far as you are concerned, Mademoiselle, nothing. I believe your story, and I accept it. The next step is to go to London and see Inspector Miller."

"And then?" asked Lily.

"And then," said Poirot, "we shall see."

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Outside the door of the study he looked once more at the little square of stained green chiffon which he held in his hand.

"Amazing," he murmured to himself complacently, "the ingenuity of Hercule Poirot."

Detective Inspector Miller was not particularly fond of M. Hercule Poirot. He did not belong to that small band of inspectors at the Yard who welcomed the little Belgian's cooperation. He was wont to say that Hercule Poirot was much overrated. In this case he felt pretty sure of himself, and greeted Poirot with high good humor in consequence.

"Acting for Lady Astwell, are you? Well, you have taken up a mare's nest in that case."

"There is, then, no possible doubt about the matter?"

Miller winked. "Never was a clearer case, short of catching a murderer absolutely red-handed."

"M. Leverson has made a statement, I understand?"

"He had better have kept his mouth shut," said the detective. "He repeats over and over again that he went straight up to his room and never went near his uncle. That's a fool story on the face of it."

"It is certainly against the weight of evidence," murmured Poirot. "How does he strike you, this young M. Leverson?"

"Darned young fool."

"A weak character, eh?"

The inspector nodded.

"One would hardly think a young man of that type would have the — how do you say it — the bowels to commit such a crime."

"On the face of it, no," agreed the inspector. "But, bless you, I have come across the same thing many times. Get a weak, dissipated young man into a corner, fill him up with a drop too much to drink, and for a limited amount of time you can turn him into a fire-eater. A weak man in a corner is more dangerous than a strong man."

"That is true, yes; that is true what you say."

Miller unbent a little further.

"Of course, it is all right for you, M. Poirot," he said. "You get your fees just the same, and naturally you have to make a pretense of examining the evidence to satisfy her Ladyship. I can understand all that."

"You understand such interesting things," murmured Poirot, and took his leave.

His next call was upon the solicitor representing Charles Leverson. Mr. Mayhew was a thin, dry, cautious gentleman. He received Poirot with reserve. Poirot, however, had his own ways of inducing confidence. In ten minutes' time the two were talking together amicably.

"You will understand," said Poirot, "I am acting in this case solely on behalf of Mr. Leverson. That is Lady Astwell's wish. She is convinced that he is not guilty."

"Yes, yes, quite so," said Mr. Mayhew without enthusiasm.

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Poirot's eyes twinkled. "You do not perhaps attach much importance to the opinions of Lady Astwell?" he suggested.

"She might be just as sure of his guilt tomorrow," said the lawyer dryly.

"Her intuitions are not evidence certainly," agreed Poirot, "and on the face of it the case looks very black against this poor young man."

"It is a pity he said what he did to the police," said the lawyer; "it will be no good his sticking to that story."

"Has he stuck to it with you?" inquired Poirot.

Mayhew nodded. "It never varies an iota. He repeats it like a parrot."

"And that is what destroys your faith in him," mused the other. "Ah, don't deny it," he added quickly, holding up an arresting hand. "I see it only too plainly. In your heart you believe him guilty. But listen now to me, to me, Hercule Poirot. I present to you a case.

"This young man comes home, he has drunk the cocktail, the cocktail, and again the cocktail, also without doubt the English whisky and soda many times. He is full of, what you call it? the courage Dutch, and in that mood he lets himself into the house with his latchkey, and he goes with unsteady steps up to the Tower room. He looks in at the door and sees in the dim light his uncle, apparently bending over the desk.

"M. Leverson is full, as we have said, of the courage Dutch. He lets himself go, he tells his uncle just what he thinks of him. He defies him, he insults him, and the more his uncle does not answer back, the more he is encouraged to go on, to repeat himself, to say the same thing over and over again, and each time more loudly. But at last the continued silence of his uncle awakens an apprehension. He goes nearer to him, he lays his hand on his uncle's shoulder, and his uncle's figure crumples under his touch and sinks in a heap to the ground.

"He is sobered then, this M. Leverson. The chair falls with a crash, and he bends over Sir Reuben. He realizes what has happened, he looks at his hand covered with something warm and red. He is in a panic then, he would give anything on earth to recall the cry which has just sprung from his lips, echoing through the house. Mechanically he picks up the chair, then he hastens out through the door and listens. He fancies he hears a sound, and immediately, automatically, he pretends to be speaking to his uncle through the open door.

"The sound is not repeated. He is convinced he has been mistaken in thinking he heard one. Now all is silence, he creeps up to his room, and at once it occurs to him how much better it will be if he pretends never to have been near his uncle that night. So he tells his story. Parsons at that time, remember, has said nothing of what he heard. When he does do so, it is too late for M.

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Leverson to change. He is stupid, and he is obstinate, he sticks to his story. Tell me, Monsieur, is that not possible?"

"Yes," said the lawyer, "I suppose in the way you put it that it is possible."

Poirot rose to his feet.

"You have the privilege of seeing M. Leverson," he said. "Put to him the story I have told you, and ask him if it is not true."

Outside the lawyer's office, Poirot hailed a taxi.

"348 Harley Street," he murmured to the driver.

Poirot's departure for London had taken Lady Astwell by surprise, for the little man had not made any mention of what he proposed doing. On his return, after an absence of twenty-four hours, he was informed by Parsons that Lady Astwell would like to see him as soon as possible. Poirot found the lady in her own boudoir. She was lying down on the divan, her head propped up by cushions, and she looked startlingly ill and haggard; far more so than she had done on the day Poirot arrived.

"So you have come back, M. Poirot?"

"I have returned, milady."

"You went to London?"

Poirot nodded.

"You didn't tell me you were going," said Lady Astwell sharply.

"A thousand apologies, milady, I am in error, I should have done so. *La prochaine fois* ——"

"You will do exactly the same," interrupted Lady Astwell with a shrewd touch of humor. "Do things first and tell people afterward, that is your motto right enough."

"Perhaps it has also been milady's motto?" His eyes twinkled.

"Now and then, perhaps," admitted the other. "What did you go up to London for, M. Poirot? You can tell me now, I suppose?"

"I had an interview with the good Inspector Miller, and also with the excellent Mr. Mayhew."

Lady Astwell's eyes searched his face.

"And you think, now ——?" she said slowly.

Poirot's eyes were fixed on her steadily.

"That there is a possibility of Charles Leverson's innocence," he said gravely.

"Ah!" Lady Astwell half sprang up, sending two cushions rolling to the ground. "I was right, then, I was right!"

"I said a possibility, Madame, that is all."

Something in his tone seemed to strike her. She raised herself on one elbow and regarded him piercingly.

"Can I do anything?" she asked.

"Yes," he nodded his head, "you can tell me, Lady Astwell, why you suspect Owen Trefusis."

"I have told you I *know* — that's all."

"Unfortunately that is not enough," said Poirot dryly. "Cast your mind back to the fatal evening, milady.

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Remember each detail, each tiny happening. What did you notice or observe about the secretary? I, Hercule Poirot, tell you there must have been something."

Lady Astwell shook her head.

"I hardly noticed him at all that evening," she said, "and I certainly was not thinking of him."

"Your mind was taken up by something else?"

"Yes."

"With your husband's animus against Miss Lily Margrave?"

"That's right," said Lady Astwell, nodding her head; "you seem to know all about it, M. Poirot."

"Me, I know everything," declared the little man with an absurdly grandiose air.

"I am fond of Lily, M. Poirot; you have seen that for yourself. Reuben began kicking up a rumpus about some reference or other of hers. Mind you, I don't say she hadn't cheated about it. She had. But, bless you, I have done many worse things than that in the old days. You have got to be up to all sorts of tricks to get round theatrical managers. There is nothing I wouldn't have written, or said, or done, in my time.

"Lily wanted this job, and she put in a lot of slick work that was not quite — well, quite the thing, you know. Men are so stupid about that sort of thing; Lily really might have been a bank clerk absconding with millions for the fuss he made about it. I was terribly worried all the evening, because, although I could usually get round Reuben in the end, he was terribly pig-headed at times, poor darling. So of course I hadn't time to go noticing secretaries, not that one does notice Mr. Trefusis much, anyway. He is just there and that's all there is to it."

"I have noticed that fact about M. Trefusis," said Poirot. "His is not a personality that stands forth, that shines, that hits you cr-r-rack."

"No," said Lady Astwell, "he is not like Victor."

"M. Victor Astwell is, I should say, explosive."

"That is a splendid word for him," said Lady Astwell. "He explodes all over the house, like one of those thingimy-jig firework things."

"A somewhat quick temper, I should imagine?" suggested Poirot.

"Oh, he's a perfect devil when roused," said Lady Astwell, "but bless you, *I'm* not afraid of him. All bark and no bite to Victor."

Poirot looked at the ceiling.

"And you can tell me nothing about the secretary that evening?" he murmured gently.

"I tell you, M. Poirot, I *know*. It's intuition. A woman's intuition ——"

"Will not hang a man," said Poirot, "and what is more to the point, it will not save a man from being hanged. Lady Astwell, if you sincerely believe that M. Leverson is innocent, and that your suspicions of the secretary are well-founded, will you consent to a little experiment?"

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"What kind of an experiment?" demanded Lady Astwell suspiciously.

"Will you permit yourself to be put into a condition of hypnosis?"

"Whatever for?"

Poirot leaned forward.

"If I were to tell you, Madame, that your intuition is based on certain facts recorded subconsciously, you would probably be skeptical. I will only say, then, that this experiment I propose may be of great importance to that unfortunate young man, Charles Leverson. You will not refuse?"

"Who is going to put me into a trance?" demanded Lady Astwell suspiciously. "You?"

"A friend of mine, Lady Astwell, arrives, if I mistake not, at this very minute. I hear the wheels of the car outside."

"Who is he?"

"A Doctor Cazalet of Harley Street."

"Is he — all right?" asked Lady Astwell apprehensively.

"He is not a quack, Madame, if that is what you mean. You can trust yourself in his hands quite safely."

"Well," said Lady Astwell with a sigh, "I think it is all bunkum, but you can try if you like. Nobody is going to say that I stood in your way."

"A thousand thanks, milady."

Poirot hurried from the room. In a few minutes he returned ushering in a cheerful, round-faced little man, with spectacles, who was very upsetting to Lady Astwell's conception of what a hypnotist should look like. Poirot introduced them.

"Well," said Lady Astwell goodhumoredly, "how do we start this tomfoolery?"

"Quite simple, Lady Astwell, quite simple," said the little doctor. "Just lean back, so — that's right, that's right. No need to be uneasy."

"I am not in the least uneasy," said Lady Astwell. "I should like to see anyone hypnotizing me against my will."

Doctor Cazalet smiled broadly.

"Yes, but if you consent, it won't be against your will, will it?" he said cheerfully. "That's right. Turn off that other light, will you, M. Poirot? Just let yourself go to sleep, Lady Astwell."

He shifted his position a little.

"It's getting late. You are sleepy — very sleepy. Your eyelids are heavy, they are closing — closing — closing. Soon you will be asleep . . ."

His voice droned on, low, soothing, and monotonous. Presently he leaned forward and gently lifted Lady Astwell's right eyelid. Then he turned to Poirot, nodding in a satisfied manner.

"That's all right," he said in a low voice. "Shall I go ahead?"

"If you please."

The doctor spoke out sharply and authoritatively: "You are asleep, Lady Astwell, but you hear me, and you can answer my questions."

Without stirring or raising an eyelid, the motionless figure on the sofa

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replied in a low, monotonous voice:

"I hear you. I can answer your questions."

"Lady Astwell, I want you to go back to the evening on which your husband was murdered. You remember that evening?"

"Yes."

"You are at the dinner table. Describe to me what you saw and felt."

The prone figure stirred a little restlessly.

"I am in great distress. I am worried about Lily."

"We know that; tell us what you saw."

"Victor is eating all the salted almonds; he is greedy. Tomorrow I shall tell Parsons not to put the dish on that side of the table."

"Go on, Lady Astwell."

"Reuben is in a bad humor tonight. I don't think it is altogether about Lily. It is something to do with business. Victor looks at him in a queer way."

"Tell us about Mr. Trefusis, Lady Astwell."

"His left shirt cuff is frayed. He puts a lot of grease on his hair. I wish men didn't, it ruins the covers in the drawing-room."

Cazalet looked at Poirot; the other made a motion with his head.

"It is after dinner, Lady Astwell, you are having coffee. Describe the scene to me."

"The coffee is good tonight. It varies. Cook is very unreliable over her coffee. Lily keeps looking out of the window, I don't know why. Now, Reuben comes into the room; he is in one of his worst moods tonight, and bursts out with a perfect flood of abuse to poor Mr. Trefusis. Mr. Trefusis has his hand round the paper-knife, the big one with the sharp blade like a knife. How hard he is grasping it; his knuckles are quite white. Look, he has dug it so hard in the table that the point snaps. He holds it just as you would hold a dagger you were going to stick into someone. There, they have gone out together now. Lily has got her green evening dress on; she looks so pretty in green, just like a lily. I must have the covers cleaned next week."

"Just a minute, Lady Astwell."

The doctor leaned across to Poirot.

"We have got it, I think," he murmured; "that action with the paper-knife, that's what convinced her that the secretary did the thing."

"Let us go on to the Tower room now."

The doctor nodded, and began once more to question Lady Astwell in his high, decisive voice.

"It is later in the evening; you are in the Tower room with your husband. You and he have had a terrible scene together, have you not?"

Again the figure stirred uneasily.

"Yes — terrible — terrible. We said dreadful things — both of us."

"Never mind that now. You can see the room clearly, the curtains were drawn, the lights were on."

"Not the middle light, only the desk light."

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"You are leaving your husband now, you are saying good night to him."

"No, I was too angry."

"It is the last time you will see him; very soon he will be murdered. Do you know who murdered him, Lady Astwell?"

"Yes. Mr. Trefusis."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because of the bulge — the bulge in the curtain."

"There was a bulge in the curtain?"

"Yes."

"You saw it?"

"Yes. I almost touched it."

"Was there a man concealed there — Mr. Trefusis?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

For the first time the monotonous answering voice hesitated and lost confidence.

"I — I — because of the paper-knife."

Poirot and the doctor again interchanged swift glances.

"I don't understand you, Lady Astwell. There was a bulge in the curtain, you say? Someone concealed there? You didn't see that person?"

"No."

"You thought it was Mr. Trefusis because of the way he held the paper-knife earlier?"

"Yes."

"But Mr. Trefusis had gone upstairs, had he not?"

"Yes — yes, that's right, he had gone upstairs."

"So he couldn't have been behind the curtain in the window?"

"No — no, of course not, he wasn't there."

"He had said good night to your husband some time before, hadn't he?"

"Yes."

"And you didn't see him again?"

"No."

She was stirring now, throwing herself about, moaning faintly.

"She is coming out," said the doctor. "Well, I think we have got all we can, eh?"

Poirot nodded. The doctor leaned over Lady Astwell.

"You are waking," he murmured softly. "You are waking now. In another minute you will open your eyes."

The two men waited, and presently Lady Astwell sat upright and stared at them both.

"Have I been having a nap?"

"That's it, Lady Astwell, just a little sleep," said the doctor.

She looked at him.

"Some of your hocus-pocus, eh?"

"You don't feel any the worse, I hope?" he asked.

Lady Astwell yawned.

"I feel rather tired and done up."

The doctor rose.

"I will ask them to send you up some coffee," he said, "and we will leave you for the present."

"Did I — say anything?" Lady Astwell called after them as they reached the door.

Poirot smiled back at her.

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"Nothing of great importance, Madame. You informed us that the drawing-room covers needed cleaning."

"So they do," said Lady Astwell. "You needn't have put me into a trance to get me to tell you that." She laughed good-humoredly. "Anything more?"

"Do you remember M. Trefusis picking up a paper-knife in the drawing-room that night?" asked Poirot.

"I don't know, I'm sure," said Lady Astwell. "He may have done so."

"Does a bulge in the curtain convey anything to you?"

Lady Astwell frowned.

"I seem to remember," she said slowly. "No—it's gone, and yet——"

"Do not distress yourself, Lady Astwell," said Poirot quickly; "it is of no importance — of no importance whatever."

The doctor went with Poirot to the latter's room.

"Well," said Cazalet, "I think this explains things pretty clearly. No doubt when Sir Reuben was dressing down the secretary, the latter grabbed tight hold on a paper-knife, and had to exercise a good deal of self-control to prevent himself answering back. Lady Astwell's conscious mind was wholly taken up with the problem of Lily Margrave, but her subconscious mind noticed and misconstrued the action.

"It implanted in her the firm conviction that Trefusis murdered Sir Reuben. Now we come to the bulge in the curtain. That is interesting. I take it from what you have told me of the Tower room that the desk was right in the window. There are curtains across that window, of course?"

"Yes, *mon ami*, black velvet curtains."

"And there is room in the embrasure of the window for anyone to remain concealed behind them?"

"There would be just room, I think."

"Then there seems at least a possibility," said the doctor slowly, "that someone was concealed in the room, but if so it could not be the secretary, since they both saw him leave the room. It could not be Victor Astwell, for Trefusis met him going out, and it could not be Lily Margrave. Whoever it was must have been concealed there *before* Sir Reuben entered the room that evening. You have told me pretty well how the land lies. Now what about Captain Naylor? Could it have been he who was concealed there?"

"It is always possible," admitted Poirot. "He certainly dined at the hotel, but how soon he went out afterward is difficult to fix exactly. He returned about half-past twelve."

"Then it might have been he," said the doctor, "and if so, he committed the crime. He had the motive, and there was a weapon near at hand. You don't seem satisfied with the idea, though?"

"Me, I have other ideas," con-

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fessed Poirot. "Tell me now, *M. le Docteur*, supposing for one minute that Lady Astwell herself had committed this crime, would she necessarily betray the fact in the hypnotic state?"

The doctor whistled.

"So that's what you are getting at? Lady Astwell is the criminal, eh? Of course — it is possible; I never thought of it till this minute. She was the last to be with him, and no one saw him alive afterward. As to your question, I should be inclined to say — No. Lady Astwell would go into the hypnotic state with a strong mental reservation to say nothing of her own part in the crime. She would answer my questions truthfully, but she would be dumb on that one point. Yet I should hardly have expected her to be so insistent on Mr. Trefusis's guilt."

"I comprehend," said Poirot. "But I have not said that I believe Lady Astwell to be the criminal. It is a suggestion, that is all."

"It is an interesting case," said the doctor after a minute or two. "Granting Charles Leverson is innocent, there are so many possibilities, Humphrey Naylor, Lady Astwell, and even Lily Margrave."

"There is another you have not mentioned," said Poirot quietly, "Victor Astwell. According to his own story, he sat in his room with the door open waiting for Charles Leverson's return, but we have only his own word for it, you comprehend?"

"He is the bad-tempered fellow, isn't he?" asked the doctor. "The one you told me about?"

"That is so," agreed Poirot.

The doctor rose to his feet.

"Well, I must be getting back to town. You will let me know how things shape, won't you?"

After the doctor had left, Poirot pulled the bell for George.

"A cup of *tisane*, George. My nerves are much disturbed."

"Certainly, sir," said George. "I will prepare it immediately."

Ten minutes later he brought a steaming cup to his master. Poirot inhaled the noxious fumes with pleasure. As he sipped it, he soliloquized aloud.

"The chase is different all over the world. To catch the fox you ride hard with the dogs. You shout, you run, it is a matter of speed. I have not shot the stag myself, but I understand that to do so you crawl for many long, long hours upon your stomach. My friend Hastings has recounted the affair to me. Our method here, my good George, must be neither of these. Let us reflect upon the household cat. For many long, weary hours, he watches the mouse hole, he makes no movement, he betrays no energy, but — he does not go away."

He sighed and put the empty cup down on its saucer.

"I told you to pack for a few days. Tomorrow, my good George, you will go to London and bring down what is necessary for a fortnight."

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"Very good, sir," said George. As usual he displayed no emotion.

The apparently permanent presence of Hercule Poirot at Mon Repos was disquieting to many people. Victor Astwell remonstrated with his sister-in-law about it.

"It's all very well, Nancy. You don't know what fellows of that kind are like. He has found jolly comfortable quarters here, and he is evidently going to settle down comfortably for about a month, charging you two guineas a day all the while."

Lady Astwell's reply was to the effect that she could manage her own affairs without interference.

Lily Margrave tried earnestly to conceal her perturbation. At the time, she had felt sure that Poirot believed her story. Now she was not so certain.

Poirot did not play an entirely quiescent game. On the fifth day of his sojourn he brought down a small thumbograph album to dinner. As a method of getting the thumbprints of the household, it seemed a rather clumsy device, yet not perhaps so clumsy as it seemed, since no one could afford to refuse their thumbprints. Only after the little man had retired to bed did Victor Astwell state his views.

"You see what it means, Nancy. He is out after one of us."

"Don't be absurd, Victor."

"Well, what other meaning could that blinking little book of his have?"

"M. Poirot knows what he is doing," said Lady Astwell complacently, and looked with some meaning at Owen Trefusis.

On another occasion Poirot introduced the game of tracing footprints on a sheet of paper. The following morning, going with his soft cat-like tread into the library, the detective startled Owen Trefusis, who leaped from his chair as though he had been shot.

"You must really excuse me, M. Poirot," he said primly, "but you have us on the jump."

"Indeed, how is that?" demanded the little man innocently.

"I will admit," said the secretary, "that I thought the case against Charles Leverson utterly overwhelming. You apparently do not find it so."

Poirot was standing looking out of the window. He turned suddenly to the other.

"I shall tell you something, M. Trefusis — in confidence."

"Yes?"

Poirot seemed in no hurry to begin. He waited a minute, hesitating. When he did speak, his opening words were coincident with the opening and shutting of the front door. For a man saying something in confidence, he spoke rather loudly, his voice drowning the sound of a footstep in the hall outside.

"I shall tell you this in confidence, Mr. Trefusis. There is new evidence. It goes to prove that when Charles Leverson entered the Tower room that night, Sir Reuben was already dead."

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The secretary stared at him.

"But what evidence? Why have we not heard of it?"

"You *will* hear," said the little man mysteriously. "In the meantime, you and I alone know the secret."

He skipped nimbly out of the room, and almost collided with Victor Astwell in the hall outside.

"You have just come in, eh, Monsieur?"

Astwell nodded.

"Beastly day outside," he said, breathing hard, "cold and blowy."

"Ah," said Poirot, "I shall not promenade myself today — me, I am like a cat, I sit by the fire and keep myself warm."

"*Ça marche*, George," he said that evening to the faithful valet, rubbing his hands as he spoke, "they are on the tenterhooks — the jump! It is hard, George, to play the game of the cat, the waiting game, but it answers, yes, it answers wonderfully. Tomorrow we make a further effect."

On the following day, Trefusis was obliged to go up to town. He went up by the same train as Victor Astwell. No sooner had they left the house than Poirot was galvanized into a fever of activity.

"Come, George, let us hurry to work. If the housemaid should approach these rooms, you must delay her. Speak to her sweet nothings, George, and keep her in the corridor."

He went first to the secretary's room, and began a thorough search. Not a drawer or a shelf was left uninspected. Then he replaced everything hurriedly, and declared his quest finished. George, on guard in the doorway, gave way to a deferential cough.

"If you will excuse me, sir?"

"Yes, my good George?"

"The shoes, sir. The two pairs of brown shoes were on the second shelf, and the patent-leather ones were on the shelf underneath. In replacing them you have reversed the order."

"Marvelous!" cried Poirot, holding up his hands. "But let us not distress ourselves over that. It is of no importance, I assure you, George. Never will M. Trefusis notice such a trifling matter."

"As you think, sir," said George.

"It is your business to notice such things," said Poirot encouragingly as he clapped the other on the shoulder. "It reflects credit upon you."

The valet did not reply, and when, later in the day, the proceeding was repeated in the room of Victor Astwell, he made no comment on the fact that Mr. Astwell's underclothing was not returned to its drawers strictly according to plan. Yet, in the second case at least, events proved the valet to be right and Poirot wrong. Victor Astwell came storming into the drawing-room that evening.

"Now, look here, you blasted little Belgian jackanapes, what do you mean by searching my room? What the devil do you think you are going to find there? I won't have it, do you hear? That's what comes of having a ferreting little spy in the house."

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Poirot's hands spread themselves out eloquently as his words tumbled one over the other. He offered a hundred apologies, a thousand, a million. He had been maladroit, officious, he was confused. He had taken an unwarranted liberty. In the end the infuriated gentleman was forced to subside, still growling.

And again that evening, sipping his *tisane*, Poirot murmured to George:

"It marches, my good George, yes — it marches."

"Friday," observed Hercule Poirot thoughtfully, "is my lucky day."

"Indeed, sir."

"You are not superstitious, perhaps, my good George?"

"I prefer not to sit down thirteen at table, sir, and I am adverse to passing under ladders. I have no superstitions about a Friday, sir."

"That is well," said Poirot, "for, see you, today we make our Waterloo."

"Really, sir."

"You have such enthusiasm, my good George, you do not even ask what I propose to do."

"And what is that, sir?"

"Today, George, I make a final thorough search of the Tower room."

True enough, after breakfast, Poirot, with the permission of Lady Astwell, went to the scene of the crime. There, at various times of the morning, members of the household saw him crawling about on all fours, examining minutely the black velvet curtains and standing on high chairs to examine the picture frames on the wall. Lady Astwell for the first time displayed uneasiness.

"I have to admit it," she said. "He is getting on my nerves at last. He has something up his sleeve, and I don't know what it is. And the way he is crawling about on the floor up there like a dog makes me downright shivery. What is he looking for, I'd like to know? Lily, my dear, I wish you would go up and see what he is up to now. No, on the whole, I'd rather you stayed with me."

"Shall I go, Lady Astwell?" asked the secretary, rising from the desk.

"If you would, Mr. Trefusis."

Owen Trefusis left the room and mounted the stairs to the Tower room. At first glance, he thought the room was empty, there was certainly no sign of Hercule Poirot there. He was just turning to go down again when a sound caught his ears; he then saw the little man halfway down the spiral staircase that led to the bedroom above.

He was on his hands and knees; in his left hand was a little pocket lens, and through this he was examining minutely something on the woodwork beside the stair carpet.

As the secretary watched him, he uttered a sudden grunt, and slipped the lens into his pocket. He then rose to his feet, holding something between his finger and thumb. At that moment he became aware of the secretary's presence.

"Ah, hah! M. Trefusis, I didn't hear you enter."

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He was in that moment a different man. Triumph and exultation beamed all over his face. Trefusis stared at him in surprise.

"What is the matter, M. Poirot? You look very pleased."

The little man puffed out his chest.

"Yes, indeed. See you I have at last found that which I have been looking for from the beginning. I have here between my finger and thumb the one thing necessary to convict the criminal."

"Then," the secretary raised his eyebrows, "it was not Charles Leverson?"

"It was not Charles Leverson," said Poirot. "Until this moment, though I know the criminal, I am not sure of his name, but at last all is clear."

He stepped down the stairs and tapped the secretary on the shoulder.

"I am obliged to go to London immediately. Speak to Lady Astwell for me. Will you request of her that everyone should be assembled in the Tower room this evening at nine o'clock? I shall be there then, and I shall reveal the truth. Ah, me, but I am well content."

And breaking into a fantastic little dance, he skipped from the Tower room. Trefusis was left staring after him.

A few minutes later Poirot appeared in the library, demanding if anyone could supply him with a little cardboard box.

"Unfortunately, I have not such a thing with me," he explained, "and there is something of great value that it is necessary for me to put inside."

From one of the drawers in the desk Trefusis produced a small box, and Poirot professed himself highly delighted with it.

He hurried upstairs with his treasure-trove; meeting George on the landing, he handed the box to him.

"There is something of great importance inside," he explained. "Place it, my good George, in the second drawer of my dressing-table, beside the jewel-case that contains my pearl studs."

"Very good, sir," said George.

"Do not break it," said Poirot. "Be very careful. Inside that box is something that will hang a criminal."

"You don't say, sir," said George.

Poirot hurried down the stairs again and, seizing his hat, departed from the house at a brisk run.

His return was more unostentatious. The faithful George, according to orders, admitted him by the side door.

"They are all in the Tower room?" inquired Poirot.

"Yes, sir."

There was a murmured interchange of a few words, and then Poirot mounted with the triumphant step of the victor to that room where the murder had taken place less than a month ago. His eyes swept around the room. They were all there, Lady Astwell, Victor Astwell, Lily Margrave, the secretary, and

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Parsons, the butler. The latter was hovering by the door uncertainly.

"George, sir, said I should be needed here," said Parsons as Poirot made his appearance. "I don't know if that is right, sir?"

"Quite right," said Poirot. "Remain, I pray of you."

He advanced to the middle of the room.

"This has been a case of great interest," he said in a slow, reflective voice. "It is interesting because anyone might have murdered Sir Reuben Astwell. Who inherits his money? Charles Leverson and Lady Astwell. Who was with him last that night? Lady Astwell. Who quarreled with him violently? Again Lady Astwell."

"What are you talking about?" cried Lady Astwell. "I don't understand, I——"

"But someone else quarreled with Sir Reuben," continued Poirot in a pensive voice. "Someone else left him that night white with rage. Supposing that Lady Astwell left her husband alive at a quarter to twelve that night, there would be ten minutes before Mr. Charles Leverson returned, ten minutes in which it would be possible for someone from the second floor to steal down and do the deed, and then return to his room again."

Victor Astwell sprang up with a cry.

"What the hell ——?" He stopped, choking with rage.

"In a rage, Mr. Astwell, you once killed a man in West Africa."

"I don't believe it," cried Lily Margrave.

She came forward, her hands clenched, two bright spots of color in her cheeks.

"I don't believe it," repeated the girl. She came close to Victor Astwell's side.

"It's true, Lily," said Astwell, "but there are things this man doesn't know. The fellow I killed was a witch doctor who had just massacred fifteen children. I consider that I was justified."

Lily came up to Poirot.

"M. Poirot," she said earnestly, "you are wrong. Because a man has a sharp temper, because he breaks out and says all kinds of things, that is not any reason why he should do a murder. I know — I *know*, I tell you — that Mr. Astwell is incapable of such a thing."

Poirot looked at her, a very curious smile on his face. Then he took her hand in his and patted it gently.

"You see, Mademoiselle," he said gently, "you also have your intuitions. So you believe in Mr. Astwell, do you?"

Lily spoke quietly.

"Mr. Astwell is a good man," she said, "and he is honest. He had nothing to do with the inside work of the Mpala Gold Fields. He is good through and through, and — I have promised to marry him."

Victor Astwell came to her side and took her other hand.

"Before God, M. Poirot," he said, "I didn't kill my brother."

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"I know you did not," said Poirot.

His eyes swept around the room.

"Listen, my friends. In an hypnotic trance, Lady Astwell mentioned having seen a bulge in the curtain that night."

Everyone's eyes swept to the window.

"You mean there was a burglar concealed there?" exclaimed Victor Astwell. "What a splendid solution!"

"Ah!" said Poirot gently. "But it was not *that* curtain."

He wheeled around and pointed to the curtain that masked the little staircase.

"Sir Reuben used the bedroom the night prior to the crime. He breakfasted in bed, and he had Mr. Trefusis up there to give him instructions. I don't know what it was that Mr. Trefusis left in that bedroom, but there was something. When he said good night to Sir Reuben and Lady Astwell, he remembered this thing and ran up the stairs to fetch it. I don't think either the husband or wife noticed him, for they had already begun a violent discussion. They were in the middle of this quarrel when Mr. Trefusis came down the stairs again.

"The things they were saying to each other were of so intimate and personal a nature that Mr. Trefusis was placed in a very awkward position. It was clear to him that they imagined he had left the room some time ago. Fearing to arouse Sir Reuben's anger against himself, he decided to remain where he was and slip out later. He stayed there behind the curtain, and as Lady Astwell left the room she subconsciously noticed the outline of his form there.

"When Lady Astwell had left the room, Trefusis tried to steal out unobserved, but Sir Reuben happened to turn his head, and became aware of the secretary's presence. Already in a bad temper, Sir Reuben hurled abuse at his secretary, and accused him of deliberately eavesdropping and spying.

"Messieurs and Mesdames, I am a student of psychology. All through this case I have looked, not for the bad-tempered man or woman, for bad temper is its own safety valve. He who can bark does not bite. No, I have looked for the good-tempered man, for the man who is patient and self-controlled, for the man who for nine years has played the part of the under dog. There is no strain so great as that which has endured for years, there is no resentment like that which accumulates slowly.

"For nine years Sir Reuben has bullied and browbeaten his secretary, and for nine years that man has endured in silence. But there comes a day when at last the strain reaches its breaking point. *Something snaps!* It was so that night. Sir Reuben sat down at his desk again, but the secretary, instead of turning humbly and meekly to the door, picks up the heavy wooden club, and strikes down the man who had bullied him once too often."

He turned to Trefusis, who was

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staring at him as though turned to stone.

"It was so simple, your alibi. Mr. Astwell thought you were in your room, but *no one saw you go there.* You were just stealing out after striking down Sir Reuben, when you heard a sound, and you hastened back to cover, behind the curtain. You were behind there when Charles Leverson entered the room, you were there when Lily Margrave came. It was not till long after that that you crept up through a silent house to your bedroom. Do you deny it?"

Trefusis began to stammer.

"I — I never ——"

"Ah! Let us finish this. For two weeks now I have played the comedy, I have showed you the net closing slowly around you. The fingerprints, footprints, the search of your room with the things artistically replaced. I have struck terror into you with all of this; you have lain awake at night fearing and wondering; did you leave a fingerprint in the room or a footprint somewhere?

"Again and again you have gone over the events of that night wondering what you have done or left undone, and so I brought you to the state where you made a slip. I saw the fear leap into your eyes today when I picked up something from the stairs where you had stood hidden that night. Then I made a great parade, the little box, the entrusting of it to George, and I go out."

Poirot turned toward the door.

"George?"

"I am here, sir."

The valet came forward.

"Will you tell these ladies and gentlemen what my instructions were?"

"I was to remain concealed in the wardrobe in your room, sir, having placed the cardboard box where you told me to. At half-past three this afternoon, sir, Mr. Trefusis entered the room; he went to the drawer and took out the box in question."

"And in that box," continued Poirot, "was a common pin. Me, I speak always the truth. I did pick up something on the stairs this morning. That is your English saying, is it not? 'See a pin and pick it up, all the day you'll have good luck.' Me, I have had good luck, I have found the murderer."

He turned to the secretary.

"You see?" he said gently. "*You betrayed yourself.*"

Suddenly Trefusis broke down. He sank into a chair sobbing, his face buried in his hands.

"I was mad," he groaned. "I was mad. But, oh, my God, he badgered and bullied me beyond bearing. For years I had hated and loathed him."

"I knew!" cried Lady Astwell.

She sprang forward, her face irradiated with savage triumph.

"I *knew* that man had done it."

She stood there, savage and triumphant.

"And you were right," said Poirot. "One may call things by different names, but the fact remains. Your 'intuition,' Lady Astwell, proved correct. I felicitate you."

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Another "turbulent tale" by Rafael Sabatini, one of the most eminent historical novelists of our time. . . . Again meet Count Alessandro Cagliostro, the 18th Century alchemist, who, claiming to possess the secret of the Philosopher's Stone, can transmute a mixture of mercury, virgin earth, and lead, plus "a quantity of powder of a brilliant red," into — behold! — "a gleaming ruddy-yellow ingot" of pure gold.

You don't believe it? Pshaw, we are surprised at you! But it is not our place to convince you — we are the instruments of your entertainment and your pleasure. Let the Man of Mystery, the Mystagogue, the Master of Molten Miracles, speak for himself. . . .

THE ALCHEMICAL EGG

by RAFAEL SABATINI

Count Cagliostro exhibited a wrath unworthy of a man in whom mastery of the secrets of nature, from microcosm to macrocosm, and consciousness of former avatars should induce a philosophic calm in all situations.

He delivered himself to his Countess, the delicately lovely Serafina. It was against the German physician, Friedrich Anton Mesmer, that he inveighed, and this torrentially in his native Italian.

"This scorpion! This slug! This larva! As insupportable as he is ridiculous with his vats and his magnetic fluids, and the rest of the empirical stock-in-trade with which he swindles credulous fools and hysterical women. Animal magnetism! Ah, Cospetto! It needs animal minds to absorb it. The Egyptian adepts, who probed the mysteries of nature to depths not even suspected by the so-called men of science of to-day, could have told this quack-salver . . ."

"Alessandro!" his Countess interrupted. "We are alone."

He checked, and drawn up to the full of his powerful, stocky middle height, his heavy black brows came together above the uncannily piercing eyes, eyes described as terrible by so many of those who had experienced their mysterious power. Then abruptly he relaxed, shrugged and acknowledged her gentle irony by a smile.

"Ah, per Bacco! Why, indeed, burn myself up over that contemptible homunculus. Let him sneer all he pleases over my claim to possess the Philosopher's Stone. The more publicly he sneers, the more publicly shall he be confounded, the more shall his crass ignorance be exposed when he is confronted with the triumph of my sublime art."

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"Be careful in what you do," she ventured. Timidity was, after all, her norm, notwithstanding that she was Grand Mistress of the Lodge of Coptic Freemasonry, which he, as Grand Copht, had consecrated, so that the fair sex should contribute to the advancement of the high mission on which he walked the earth. Ten years younger than her husband, she seemed scarcely more than a child, very slenderly fashioned and finely featured, with a skin that was like mother-of-pearl and eyes of a gentian blue, from which innocence and candour looked shyly upon the world. Her ethereal personality supplied an arresting complement to his overpowering vigour.

"Madame de Choiseul was telling me," she warned him, "that this man possesses great knowledge and power. He is ——"

Cagliostro broke in derisively. "Madame de Choiseul! That hen! Will you quote me her cacklings? Madonna! I'll so deal with this Tudescan empiric, this dear Signor Mesmer, that he shall crawl to me for pardon. I'll give him magnetism; a bellyful of it; enough to sicken and break him. And not of the animal variety."

Yet behind the fierce boast a certain anxiety lurked in the stout heart of the thaumaturge. Monsieur de Vivonne, one of his most loyal disciples, had reported to him that Mesmer was proclaiming him a charlatan who was not even original; a charlatan modeled upon the famous Comte de Saint Germain, a clumsy plagiarist of the arts of that mysterious, gifted man who had been the intimate of the late King. Like Saint Germain, Cagliostro pretended to a sort of immortality, but whereas Saint Germain merely conveyed the impression that he had been an eyewitness of the march of history, Cagliostro — in the actual words of Mesmer — explicitly and impudently asserted his fabulous longevity. Not content, as Saint Germain had been, to pretend to increase the size of diamonds, Cagliostro claimed to manufacture those with which he plastered himself to excess, and where Saint Germain was content to profess that he could induce the oyster to grow pearls, Cagliostro boasted that he could fashion pearls of great price by an amalgamation of little, worthless ones. Like Saint Germain, he gave out that he had discovered the Philosopher's Stone, that he could transmute metals, and by means of an elixir prolong life indefinitely.

"In fact," Monsieur de Vivonne reported Mesmer to have said, "this impudent Italian has appropriated the whole of Saint Germain's stock-in-trade, and vulgarized it."

To Cagliostro this had been the cruelest cut of all. He rehearsed it now to his Countess. "What was that Latin tag this son of a dog spat out? Ah, yes: *Nihil textigit quod non inquinavit.* I touch nothing but I soil it! Cospetto! We shall see who will be soiled by what I shall show him here to-night."

"He is coming here?" Serafina displayed anxiety.

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"His Eminence of Rohan has asked me if he might bring him, so that he may be humbled by witnessing the little transmutation I am to demonstrate."

She stood up. "And you . . ."

He reared his majestic head. He seemed to swell and grow with pride. "I have told the Cardinal-Prince that Doctor Mesmer shall act as my fellow-spagyrist in the operation."

"Oh!" It was a trembling gasp of dismay. "I hope you know what you are doing. Beware of over-confidence, Alessandro. This man Mesmer is no fool. I am afraid of him."

Cagliostro answered her with the scornful laugh of him whose confidence in his own powers is to be shaken by nothing human.

The company that assembled in the Rue St. Claude that night was some thirty strong, and as distinguished as any that the Paris of Louis XVI could muster. There was the old Prince de Soubise, whom an elixir of Cagliostro's had cured when the doctors were despairing of his life; there was the handsome, stately Cardinal-Prince de Rohan, Grand Almoner of France, who had witnessed so many of Cagliostro's miracles that he accounted him the most sublime of men; Monsieur de Vergennes, the Minister, was present, and the Count d'Avrincourt with his elegant Countess; the gay Duchess of Polignac and the Duchess of Choiseul, too, were prominent members of that exalted gathering, all of them disciples of the great Cagliostro.

Lackeys, in the Count's livery of blue and silver, ushered the illustrious guests into the dimly-lighted laboratory, where he and his Countess stood to receive them, and where chairs were set in orderly rows for their accommodation.

At the far end of the long room, under a cowled chimney-piece, glowed the athanor, or furnace. Beside it there was a brass-bound tub of water. Before it stood a long table covered by a black cloth on which there was an array of glass jars, phials, porcelain bowls, a small clay crucible, and some further objects. Another table to the left of the furnace was encumbered with alchemical vessels in glass and copper, phials, retorts, alembics, mortars and the like, and above this, at something more than a man's height, a shelf that was similarly laden.

The Cardinal-Prince, who was among the last to arrive, brought with him a dour-faced, pallid man, who derived from his funereal garments and his black unpowdered hair something of the air of a crow. He was presented as Friedrich Anton Mesmer, and the sturdy Cagliostro, resplendent as a bird of paradise in a gown of yellow arabesques upon a rose-coloured ground, beamed upon him in welcome, and delivered himself effusively in his queer jargon of compounded French and Italian.

"My poor laboratory is honoured. Your Eminence must persuade Doctor Mesmer to lend me his assistance in my little experiment. The collaboration of so illustrious a confrere is

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something of which I shall boast myself hereafter."

If Mesmer suspected irony, he remained outwardly unmoved. Having come there expressly so as to unmask Cagliostro, nothing could suit him better than this opportunity, so rashly afforded him, for the closest vigilance. It was a satisfaction shared by the spectators, but from opposite motives. These loyal disciples of the Grand Copht, the men all initiates of his Lodge of Supreme Wisdom, aware of how Mesmer had defamed him, rejoiced in the prospect of the crushing answer they knew the Master could not fail to deliver.

Cagliostro drove out the servants, locked the doors, covered the lower half of his splendours by an apron, and tossed another one to Mesmer so that he might similarly protect his garments.

"All is in readiness," he announced. "Here is the mercury to be transmuted. Examine it, Doctor, and weigh it carefully. It should amount to exactly a pound."

Tight-lipped, he solemnly weighed an empty glass jar, so as to ascertain its tare, and then poured into it the mercury, scanning it closely as it passed from one vessel to the other. Although the light was dim, he could not, from its behaviour, doubt the nature of the metal. He placed the loaded jar in one of the scales. "It weighs exactly a pound," he agreed dourly.

"Let us proceed." The mystagogue took up a bottle of clear glass in the bottom of which could be seen a minute quantity of a grey-brown powder. He displayed it, turning the bottle about, his every movement ritualistic. "In this we have thirty grains of virgin earth."

"Of what?" barked Mesmer, leaning forward.

"Virgin earth," Cagliostro stolidly repeated. "Or, if you prefer it, Secondary Matter." And contemptuously he explained: "It is procured by distilling rainwater to the point of siccity." He proffered it to Mesmer. "You will oblige me, Doctor, by taking one of those empty jars, and weighing into it precisely half of the mercury, which you will then transfer to this bottle."

When it was done, Cagliostro held up a phial, containing three or four ounces of a colourless liquid. "Give me the vessel. Observe now that I add to the mixture of mercury and virgin earth exactly thirty drops of this extract of Saturn."

The scorn fermenting in Mesmer's soul found sudden and harsh expression. "Distilled from the planet, I suppose," he croaked.

The Master stood arrested, the phial poised. He turned a blank stare upon his colleague. "But is it possible, Doctor, that your learning stops short of the knowledge that the alchemists call Saturn that which is vulgarly known as lead? Do not tell me, sir, that I must talk the language of the streets so as to be intelligible to a man of science."

Less the rebuff, itself, than the

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ripple of amusement that stirred the company left Mesmer without an answer, confused and mortified, whilst Cagliostro, suavely resuming his task, counted aloud as with a steady hand he dispensed the thirty drops. Then, closing the bottle with a stopper, he shook it vigorously before holding it out and turning it slowly about.

"And now, Doctor, take another of those empty bottles and pour into it the other half of the mercury. I thank you. Upon this too I pour thirty drops of the extract of Saturn. Similarly I shake it well. Now take both bottles, yourself, Doctor, and unite their contents in this third one."

Mesmer, who, since his rebuff, had completely put aside his air of derision, obeyed in sullen and nervous silence.

"Cover it with that stopper, and shake the mass so that it will blend! Enough! You perceive that it has now lost its lustre and has become a dull grey."

Cagliostro went aside to the shelf, reached up and took from it a clay vessel of the size of a coconut.

"Here is our crucible. Be good enough now to pour the mass into it. Now hold it out."

From a breast pocket the Master drew a slender parchment envelope. He opened one end of it, and more than ever with the air of performing a ritual he shook from it, upon the matter in the crucible, a quantity of powder of a brilliant red. Next he dipped a bowl into the tub of water, withdrew it half-full, and placed it on the table. After that he went aside again to the shelf, and reached for a square wooden box. From this, with an ivory-handled trowel, he ladled some white plaster into the water, and leaving the trowel in the bowl he desired Mesmer to mix it so that he might seal the crucible with it. Whilst Mesmer was obeying, he went to replace the box upon its shelf.

Under the Master's observing eye, the doctor completed the mixture and began to plaster the mouth of the crucible as he was bidden. He had just succeeded in covering the aperture, when Cagliostro snatched the crucible from his hands. "In the name of Heaven, man, don't you see that the mixture is too thin? Will you spoil all? It needs more plaster. Wait."

With the crucible in his left hand, he turned yet again to the shelf and reached up for the box. He came back with it to the table. "Give me the trowel." He was brisk and peremptory. He ladled more plaster into the water, mixed it briskly, and then slapped coat after coat of the thicker consistency upon the crucible until it was completely sealed.

"There. It is done. Behold the alchemical egg." He held it aloft a moment, then thrust it once more into Mesmer's hands. "Take it, my friend. Set it for an instant on the edge of the athanor to dry. Meanwhile with the bellows I quicken the fire with which we are to hatch it."

Since this hatching operation would, he announced, take a half-hour, he placed a stool by the athanor

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for Mesmer so that he might sit on guard over the crucible, when presently, the plaster having set, he had thrust it, under Cagliostro's direction, into the very heart of the glowing fire.

To beguile for his guests the time of waiting, the Master discoursed to them in his queer Italianate jargon of the labours of the alchemists to wrest from nature the secrets that should carry men nearer to the gods. By way of the Kabbalists and the Arab alchemists, he came at length, logically but with a malice, that was presently to appear, to speak of the great Theophrastus Bombast of Hohenheim, better known to the world as Paracelsus, who had formed himself upon them.

Mesmer's accusation of plagiarism rankled with him. It represented a debt to be repaid in kind, and it was to this repayment that he now addressed himself.

"What a sublime man was that!" he sighed, in allusion to Paracelsus. "And to what hideous persecution was he not subjected by the envious spite of the medical faculty of his day. Of what stupid, cruel calumnies was he not the victim! They called him the Luther of Medicine. That was their way of branding him a dangerous heretic. I remember him so well, that unforgettable man. It will be two centuries and a half ago, in 1527 or 1528, that he occupied the chair of medicine at the University of Bâle. I recall the date because it was at about the time of the sack of Rome by the Constable de Bourbon."

Whilst his noble audience, hushed and enthralled as ever when this Man of Mystery spoke out of the memories of his immeasurable past, gazed upon him in round-eyed awe, Mesmer, a little behind him, cross-legged upon his stool, twisted his thin lips into a smile of scorn.

Cagliostro went quietly on, moving slowly to and fro as he spoke.

"A little man he was, weakly of body, but with the strength of soul and mind that conquers worlds. I remember how he disdained the outward show of doctoral robe, gold chain and crimson cane. I saw him come to his first lecture in a homely suit of grey that was stained from his chemical experiments, a flat black cap to cover his premature baldness, and at his side a sword that never left him. This because once he had been a military surgeon in the armies of the King of Sweden. The students laughed to see him. But they did not laugh when the lecture was ended. Ah, Cospetto! No. They had not listened to the usual trite re-hash of Galen. They had heard revolutionary theories upon the treatment of disease, and an odd insistence upon the cultivation of an intuitive sense which opened a new world to them.

"The nights I spent at work with him in Bâle, and later at Colmar! And if much I was able to teach him, yet there was much that he taught me. For there was no branch of medical or alchemical lore which he had not investigated.

"I am reminded by the presence

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of Doctor Mesmer here that it was Paracelsus who first expounded the virtue of magnetism and prescribed the magnet as a healing agent, thus being the inventor of a science which men today, in their ignorance, are beginning to call Mesmerism."

That stirred his listeners. But whilst de Rohan was smiling a benign approval of the Master, Mesmer was bounding, livid, from his stool, to roar a question. "What is that you dare to say?"

Thus rudely checked, Cagliostro half turned. "You do not believe me?" he asked in plaintive surprise.

"Believe you? By God! The effrontery of you!" Mesmer choked in his wrath. "Not content with the imposture of your mummeries, you must have recourse to calumny."

"Calumny! My friend!" Cagliostro's tone was shocked. "You are overheated, Doctor. Read the *Herbarius Theophrasti* of Paracelsus. You will find there the fruit of his experiments in magnetism. And," he added gently, "you will realize that, as Solomon said, there is nothing new under the sun."

"Solomon said that in your hearing, I suppose," was the other's furious sneer. "Where is it to be found, this book? Does it exist at all or is it but another of your inventions, to bolster up your slander?"

The Cardinal gently interposed. "Be sure that it exists, Monsieur Mesmer. Count Cagliostro is the possessor of a copy. I have, myself, seen the passages to which he alludes."

"As you shall see them, sir," Cagliostro promised, "so that you may assure yourself that it is possible for two gifted minds independently to arrive at identical conclusions." Thus, gracefully, without resentment of Mesmer's insults, the Master opened a door by which the doctor might escape. But it nowise soothed the doctor. The mischief was done, and might be irrevocable. The very terms in which Cagliostro now went on to exonerate him only made the matter worse.

"After all, Doctor, it is not for you to be offended, but for me whom you could suppose capable of such a baseness as to defame a colleague by imputing plagiarism to him. It was never in my mind that you were re-cooking the scraps from Paracelsus' table; for God knows I had no reason to suppose that his learned works were included in your studies." Then, with an abrupt change of manner that brushed the whole question aside, he returned to the furnace. "But to our purpose. The egg should by now be hatched."

He placed an iron dish upon the table, and with a pair of tongs seized the crucible and lifted it from the glowing embers. The clatter with which it dropped upon the dish was as a signal to the company. There was a scraping of chairs and a forward shuffle accompanied by a momentary hum of talk.

Cagliostro smote the crucible sharply with a hammer. It cracked across, and, as the two halves fell apart, in the heart of it was disclosed

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to the awed gaze of the spectators a gleaming ruddy-yellow ingot. The miracle of the transmutation was complete.

He took the ingot in the tongs, held it forward for a moment, so that all might behold it clearly, then plunged it into the water-tub. When presently it was cool, he set it down upon the table.

"Eminence, permit me to offer you this product of the Philosopher's Stone, so that you may bestow its proceeds upon the poor of your diocese."

"Ever as benevolent as you are munificent, Count," murmured Rohan, whilst the company broke into exclamations of praise and wonder. And then, abruptly, dominating all, came the harsh voice of Mesmer.

"Impossible! I say it is impossible!"

"Sadducee!" The Prince de Soubise apostrophized him. And "For shame, sir!" cried the Duchess of Polignac, whilst others still more angrily rebuked him, until Cagliostro raised a restraining hand.

"My friend, there is no need for heat. Monsieur Mesmer but displays the proper scientific mind, which cautiously refuses to accept until the last proof has been supplied." Smiling into the doctor's pallid furious face, he added: "My dear colleague, you shall yourself apply the tests. I will furnish the acids, and you . . ."

There Mesmer interrupted. "Tests? What do I care for tests? What need for tests? I may not be an alchemist; but I am chemist enough to know that this is an imposture; for, in the first place, it is impossible that there should be a liquefaction of metal at the paltry heat of that furnace."

"How, then, comes the gold to be present, sir?" asked Monsieur de Vergennes.

"That is for Monsieur de Cagliostro to tell us," was the answering sneer.

Dolefully the Man of Mystery shook his noble head; sadly his great eyes considered the magnetist. "Oh, my friend! My poor friend! How stout is the assurance that has its roots in ignorance! No liquefaction at that temperature, you say. But mercury, sir, is a fluid metal. It is already liquid whilst cold, as every school boy knows."

"Mercury, ay. But not gold. And before gold can set into a solid ingot as a result of transmutation it must be present in a liquid state."

"Must, eh? Why must it? Does it not occur to you that therein lies the very secret of the transmutation of a fluid into a solid? How can you understand the release of latent forces contained in matter when you are not even aware of their existence?"

"He should know something now," said Avrincourt, "since at least he has seen the results."

Silenced by that alchemical jargon, stung by the ridicule of that illustrious company, Mesmer took his departure that night from the laboratory in the Rue St. Claude, baffled, mortified, but unalterably persuaded that he had witnessed an imposture.

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The conclusions he reached after a sleepless night of brooding he communicated next day to Monsieur de Vivonne, when that unsuspected disciple of the mystagogue came to him on the pretext of magnetic treatment.

"I insist," said the raging doctor, "that the athanor, the crucible and the rest are no more than the appurtenances of fraud, the properties of the comedy he played. I know, if I know anything, that no transmutation could be accomplished without at least the degree of heat necessary to melt the metal. The lack of it betrays the ignorance of that charlatan. His explanation was a ready-witted impudence."

"But the gold, you say, was in the crucible. How came it there?"

"A common conjuring trick. I must have detected it at once, but that his calculated offensiveness had disturbed my mind and distracted my perceptions. In the quiet of the night, going step by step over all that happened in that laboratory, I solved it. I remembered how he snatched the crucible from my hands on the pretext that the plaster — which he had prepared himself, remember — was too thin, and how he went to the shelf for the plaster box. For a moment then his back was turned, and his body, as he leaned forward against the side-table, acted as a screen. It concealed his left hand and the crucible it held. Under cover of it he changed that crucible for another, similarly half-plastered, that stood ready behind some of the appliances littering the table. Don't you see how simple it is? That is how this vile impostor gulls his foolish following."

Monsieur de Vivonne implied that he could scarcely believe in so much turpitude. Afterwards, with scrupulous fidelity, he reported all to Count Cagliostro, and together they laughed over a scepticism so obstinate and a perversity so spiteful as to produce so stupid an invention. But to Serafina, when Cagliostro reported in his turn, he did not laugh at all.

"That misbegotten German horse-leech will be spreading this pretty discovery of his all over Paris. The addleheaded hysterics who frequent his magnetic bathtub will act as his Mercuries."

"You would have done better," opined the demure Serafina, "had you let me deal with him."

"With him? With that frost-bitten dish-washer? That chilblain? There's no blood in him to quicken, my dear."

"And what now? Something you must do to check this mischief?"

"Something, yes, per Bacco! But, tell me, what? What?"

It was Mesmer himself who was to answer that despairing question a week later, through the lips of the Cardinal de Rohan.

His Eminence sought the mystagogue in the Rue St. Claude. "Monsieur Mesmer takes his defeat badly."

"I know. I know. I've heard his tale. May his malice choke the dog."

"He must be persuaded of his error; persuaded of it beyond possi-

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bility of further doubt. It is the only way to silence him, and I am sure that you can do it."

Cagliostro's stocky figure seemed to assume height. He became majestic. "Am I concerned to silence every cur that yelps at me? Who will believe this miserable empiric, unless it be some of the poor witlings he magnetizes, who matter nothing."

But Rohan shook his noble, powdered head. "It's a scurrilous world, my friend. It delights in diminishing the great. Mesmer is providing a weapon for the hand of malice. It must be struck from his grasp. You must demonstrate for him again."

Cagliostro's eyes were hard. "That would not strangle his mendacity."

"Oh yes. It will compel him, unless he could take you *in flagrante*, to acknowledge his error, and to hold his peace. I know of no other way in which it can be done."

Cagliostro moved about the chamber angrily. He vowed he was indifferent to unbelief. He did not demonstrate for the amusement of ignorant doubters, or for charlatans who saw tricks in everything they could not understand. Mesmer had not only seen a gold ingot made, he had assisted in the making of it. If that did not convince him, it was because he did not desire to be convinced. Cagliostro could do no more. It would be beneath his dignity. Besides, he ended, it was not likely that Mesmer would consent to come. He would fear to be robbed of the last pretext for his calumnies.

"As for that," said Rohan, "I have enough influence to compel him. It must be done, dear Master." He was emphatic. "I wish it. You must not lie under this stigma, which all of us who believe in you must share. Depend upon me to arrange the matter."

He departed, leaving Cagliostro to gloom in a simmer of baffled rage upon the unresponsive images of Isis and Hippocrates that adorned his salon.

Some two or three nights later, came the second demonstration. It differed in little from the first. The same distinguished company was gathered in the dimly-lighted laboratory, saving that now Monsieur de Vergennes was absent, and a prince of the blood, the Duc de Chartres, a member of Cagliostro's Lodge, was present. The same properties were provided, the fire glowed in the furnace, and Monsieur Mesmer was there to assist, his countenance pale, his eyes glittering with suppressed excitement.

Behind locked doors the preparations followed the same course as on the last occasion, with, however, one slight, yet to Doctor Mesmer very notable, exception. When the elements had been mixed and deposited in the crucible, Cagliostro did not, as before, invite his assistant to plaster it, but undertook the task himself. Taking the vessel from Mesmer, with his left hand he picked up with his right the water-bowl, and went to place it on the encumbered side-table. Then, still retaining the crucible, and with

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his back to the spectators, he reached up to the shelf above for the plaster-box, poured plaster from it into the bowl, and with a trowel set himself vigorously to mix.

It was all most natural, and every eye but Mesmer's had inevitably followed his right hand as it reached up. The doctor, however, who knew what to look for, watched the mystagogue's body, noted how heavily and closely it leaned against the table under the shelf; his ears caught even a tinkle of one vessel against another, to betray a clumsiness in his juggling. With grim amusement he observed that Cagliostro splashed a trowelful of the swiftly-mixed plaster over the mouth of the crucible before he turned again to continue the operation in full view of all, like a man who has nothing to conceal.

"There," the Count announced at last, holding the crucible aloft, "is the alchemical egg complete. I deliver it into your care, Doctor, so that with your own hands you may place it upon the athanor."

Mesmer, whose pale lips wore the cruel smile into which they had curled as he watched Cagliostro at the shelf, received the crucible, and for a long moment held it between his two hands, making no movement. Then he spoke, and his voice was a hoarse rasp of sarcasm.

"Why trouble to place it in the furnace — the athanor, as you call it in the language of quackery?"

"How?" Cagliostro glared at him, and in those terrible eyes Mesmer beheld, as he expected, a reflection of fear.

"How else is the transmutation to be effected?" asked someone in indignant impatience.

Mesmer turned squarely to the gathering. "Transmutation! There is no transmutation. There is a swindle, a vulgar trick of legerdemain, and that is performed already."

Cagliostro reached forward in a sudden wild fury. "Give me that crucible!" he roared.

But the doctor drew back, fiercely retaining it, gathering assurance.

"Ah, no. It has been entrusted to me, this precious alchemical egg." He laughed unpleasantly. "I do not relinquish it."

There was a general stir of annoyance, and the Duke of Chartres demanded what he meant.

"I mean, Highness, that this crucible is not the crucible that I prepared. It has been changed. That is why it is unnecessary to protract this nauseous comedy by subjecting it to the fire."

"Your spite makes you very rash, sir," cried Rohan, and after his came other indignant protests.

But Mesmer coldly faced a hostility over which he was assured of triumph. "God knows I am no gambler," he said, "but I will wager anyone a hundred louis that the transmutation has already taken place, that the gold ingot is already in this crucible."

"I'll take the wager," eagerly cried Madame de Polignac. "A hundred louis, Monsieur Mesmer."

Cagliostro uttered a groan of dis-

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tress, and Serafina, watching him from amongst the spectators, felt her senses begin to swim. Then the mystagogue was bellowing like a calf.

"No, no! Domeniddio! This must go no further. I will not permit it. I will not suffer that my sublime arts should be subjected to this prostitution. Give me that crucible, Monsieur Mesmer. At once."

An icy breath of doubt in their Master momentarily chilled his disciples as they saw him reach forth in frenzy and heard the exulting laugh with which Mesmer again eluded him.

"Aha, you charlatan!" the doctor mocked. "Exposure is upon you."

He seized a flat trowel, dropped the crucible onto the table, and by a smashing blow with the sharp edge of the tool reduced it to fragments, crying triumphantly: "Behold!"

The spectators crowded forward fearfully to the table's edge, and stood there in utter silence, gaping at the squelched grey mud-like mass that the fractured vessel yielded.

Thus for a long moment. Then a terrific explosion of laughter deafened the appalled and bewildered Mesmer.

Tumbled from the lofty pinnacle of his false confidence, and shattered in spirit by the fall, the German doctor stood shaking, limp and pallid, whilst Cagliostro fulminated with eye and tongue to complete his annihilation.

"Derider of mysteries you are too base to apprehend! Defiler of the altars to Hygeia! Buffoon! Impostor! Away to your swindling washtubs and the poor hysterics upon whom you prey! Out of my house, and never again dishonour it by your presence!" He strode across to the door, unlocked it, and flung it wide. "Out, sir, before I summon my lackeys to cast you from a threshold you have desecrated."

Discomfited, hangdog, wincing under the derision with which the company belaboured him, realizing the futility now of all protests, Mesmer was glad to be permitted to escape.

Later, when the last of their noble guests had departed rejoicing in a faith confirmed, Cagliostro faced Serafina with a grim smile.

"I do not think that we shall have any more annoyance from Monsieur Mesmer, if, indeed, he survives the ridicule that will haunt him."

Serafina's lovely, child-like face was blank. "I am still trembling," she confessed, "at the risks you took. What if he had *not* broken the crucible? What if, obeying you, he had placed it in the furnace? What then would have been the end?"

He pinched her ear and gave her the tolerant smile of the god for the purblind mortal. "Little pullet, why these questions? It is the faculty of great minds, the very quintessence of their greatness, to perceive exactly how lesser minds will function in given circumstances. If I had not the intelligence to plumb the shallow puddle of Monsieur Mesmer's wit, or exactly to foresee its workings, then I should not be Cagliostro."

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In 1949 the South African Broadcasting Corporation ran a short-story competition. Nearly 1000 entries were received. W. Heidenfeld's "Moonshine" shared second prize with three other stories, and all the prize-winning tales were read over the air from the Johannesburg, Capetown, and Durban studios.

The author of "Moonshine" was born in Berlin, Germany, in 1911, studied law until a megalomaniac paperhanger sent him packing in 1933, and wound up in South Africa where, among many other pursuits, Mr. Heidenfeld has been the South African chess champion (undefeated since 1939), a beauty preparations canvasser, a public relations assistant, a free-lance journalist, an editor, and the owner and director of Johannesburg's leading bridge club.

At the time of this writing, Mr. Heidenfeld and his good friend Peter Godfrey (creator of detective Rolf le Roux) are collaborating on a book tentatively called CHALLENGE TO MURDER! *In this volume of shorts Mr. Heidenfeld challenges Mr. Godfrey to solve six problems based on traditional detective-story gambits (The Locked Room, The Secret Message, The Clue Left by the Dying Man, etc.), with a well-known South African true-crime writer acting as umpire. [Editors' Note: Yes, we have already put in an advance order for this book, with a view to bringing the Heidenfeld-Godfrey detectival duel to EQMM readers.]*

MOONSHINE

by W. HEIDENFELD

DRINKING and chatting, just drinking and chatting — all soldiers on leave, in the rat-tattling train. There'd been a bout of singing now and then, and one of the chaps had a mouth organ. We'd been "marching to Pretoria" a good deal, and the dining-car stewards had marched with us part of the way. They had seen many soldiers' parties and knew the routine and joined in when nobody was looking or checking up on them.

But one by one the chaps had gone to their compartments, and in the end only the girl and I remained in the empty diner. She hadn't said much throughout the evening. Time and again she had thoughtfully stared into her glass, and her soft voice had a forced note when she had joined in our raucous songs.

The stewards dimmed the lights. It was darker now in the diner than outside, where the moon stroked, with

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gentle fingers, the rolling, sweet-smelling country of the Midlands. The hills, deep dark against the lighted flat, were intimate and alluring. The white road, made whiter by the moon, lay naked. But to the left and right a slight haze was settling on the fields — a silvery veil glistening in the shine of the full moon.

She was a mousy, insignificant sort of girl, even in her captain's uniform. If I'd met her in the street, I wouldn't have turned round to steal a look at her face, or to watch her walk. But it was different now. Not that she attracted me — I just wanted to know. Know what went on behind that broad, studious forehead, behind those vague gray eyes that looked straight into yours and yet evaded you.

Since my boyhood I've had this urge to know: to probe people, talk to them, and make them talk to me. At 'varsity, I would go up to the professor after the lecture, with a trumped-up question the answer to which I could find in any reference book — merely to get an idea of how his mind worked. And all the girls I had been friendly with — they might not kiss, but they had to tell. And here was a girl who was so obviously busy trying to find a way through complications, grappling with uncertainties, struggling against herself.

Suddenly the car was filled with a vile, choking smoke. The moon was blotted out. The strains of the mouth-organ — coming from a nearby compartment — were curiously magnified, echoing from the walls of the tunnel.

We sputtered and coughed. She took the handkerchief I offered and pressed it against her eyes and nose.

But there is an end to every tunnel. We could breathe again, and we could see again. The moon seemed higher suddenly and brighter.

"Isn't she beautiful?" I said, pointing up with the handkerchief she had returned. It wasn't a very skillful opening, perhaps. But then the moon was very beautiful after the tunnel had almost choked us.

A frown gathered on her forehead and traveled down to her eyes. She seemed farther away than ever. Then she spoke.

"You shouldn't have said that," she said. "It was on a night like this that I gave my boyfriend to my country."

It sounded curiously unreal. It's stilted enough, that phrase, when a mother uses it of her son, or a wife of her husband. Give somebody to your country. As though he were yours to give . . . And yet, though unreal, it did not sound theatrical when she said it. It sounded as though there was some hidden meaning — something that couldn't be grasped by a stranger.

I didn't say anything then. I did not urge her on. But my eyes spoke in a language she couldn't misunderstand.

"I have to tell someone," she said at length. "Someone who just listens. Friends have pity. You are not a friend . . . I joined the army early

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in the war, as a sergeant in one of the hush-hush departments. My work doesn't matter here. I liked it, and I was happy in a vague, ununderstanding sort of way.

"But then it happened. For the first time in my life I fell in love. His name was Gerald. He was — oh, he was so comradely and so gentle. It may be easy to find a man to make love to you; but it isn't easy to find one who'd sit with you, silently, for hours, who'd just stroke your hair or rub the skin above your wrist. Somebody who isn't violent and insistent.

"His presence was all that mattered. I learned little about his past. He told me he'd spent most of his youth in a little place in the North of England and had never left it before coming to South Africa. That was just before the war; and he'd enlisted shortly after. I never saw him write home. I remember I once asked him; and he seemed a little embarrassed and said he didn't have anybody to write to.

"It's a thankless job to try to find out why you are drawn to a person. There was so much I loved in Gerald. He had a breadth of view doubly surprising in one who had grown up in a small village. But what I liked most about him was his carefree enthusiasm for the work of others, his capacity to see good in other people.

"Take his major, for instance. I doubt whether Major — let's skip the name — whether his Commanding Officer really was such a fine fellow; a paragon of virtue and a pillar of wisdom, as Gerald made him out to be. 'What a wonderful man,' he would say in his curiously harsh accent, extolling some exploit the significance of which would escape me entirely.

"That he talked shop to me was a compliment in itself. Of course, he knew I was in hush-hush, but that alone wouldn't have induced him to talk. He never tired of pointing out how unguarded comments might do damage in many ways unsuspected by most soldiers. Spying, he would say, was a job at which you gathered your information bit by bit, from a slip of the tongue here or an interchange of glances there. He surprised me more than once by hinting at developments which my own boss regarded as top secrets. How had he managed to get the information? Oh, just putting two and two together.

"And then one evening we went out to Fountains. We danced for a while, but the crowd was noisy and rowdy, so we left and found ourselves a quiet bench and sat by ourselves and looked at the moon. His right arm was around me. At first, he talked on his favorite subject, the major, trying to unfold to me the wonders of the man's mind. But when I did not respond, he dropped the topic. We fell quiet, listening to the crickets, each absorbed in the stillness around us, the presence of the other, and the goodness of living. The moon was weaving grotesque patterns on the grass, and I was watching idly as they changed — slowly, so very slowly."

She gave a little moaning sound as

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the subdued strains of *Sarie Marais* came to us from the mouth organ. "It's the same moon, and the same songs," she said, "but everything else is different.

"We had been sitting for a long time," she continued, "when Gerald, looking up to the sky, said, 'Isn't he wonderful?' 'Who is?' I asked, a little drowsily. 'Oh, the m . . . the major, of course,' he said, and I could feel rather than see his embarrassment. 'Who else could it be?' he added, rather defiantly.

"Now that tone wasn't at all like him. Usually, if he bothered me with his bubbling hero worship, he would be apologetic — would make up to me as though a little afraid I might be jealous of his major. This time it was different.

"We went home silently. Dimly I felt something had happened that required a lot of thinking. Something threatening and destructive.

"It was a trifling incident — just moonshine, you might say. But it tortured me for days. I kept visualizing the scene, re-enacting every bit of it. How he had spoken, how he had looked, how he had moved. I won't forget it as long as I live."

She stopped for a little while and seemed to listen intently. The mouth organ artist was still at work. *We are the air force boys, we are the air force boys* . . .

She hummed the melody. "In the end," she said suddenly, "I could stand it no longer. I asked for an interview with the local Internal Security officer. I told him everything that had happened, and everything I felt had happened. They are good, these Internal Security fellows." She smiled wanly.

"It didn't take long. Once you give them the tip-off, they are sure to get the whole story. And Gerald's story was simple. He was" — she swallowed — "he was a Nazi spy. They found out everything — about his training, about the work he had been doing. He was hanged. He never knew that I had given him away." She fell silent, a faraway look on her face.

"I was suitably rewarded," she continued after a while, bitterly. "That's how I got these." She pointed at the three pips on her uniform. "Judas money. How I hate war!"

I sat silent, waiting for her to tell me more. Once again she was humming a melody, but this time there had been no mouth organ to give her the cue. It was a haunting melody, sad and lovely and full of an insatiable longing.

"That was a German folk song," she said, turning to me. "*Guter Mond, du gehst so stille* . . ."

"But I don't . . ."

"You don't understand? But it's quite easy, really. You see, my hush-hush work depends on my knowledge of German. I know the language inside out. And I also know that it is the only language spoken by white men in which the moon is referred to as 'he' . . ."

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THE MEDICAL FINGER

by ELLERY QUEEN

IN WATCHING OVER the special interests of women since early Roman times, the queen of heaven has had more names, shapes, and identities than the notorious Sophie Lang. As Caprotina, Juno was worshiped by female slaves; as Sospita, the savior, she was invoked by women in their perils; under titles like Cinxia, Unxia, and Pronuba, she played the leading role in the ritual of marriage; as Iuno Lucina, her protection was implored by occupants of the labor stools; and on the Matronalia, the married ladies with their maiden daughters met at her temple in a grove on the Esquiline and made offerings. Also, not to be sentimental about it, Juno is found represented as a war goddess — a fine recognition by the ancients that, where the fairer sex is concerned, all is not moonlight and roses. The animals sacred to her were the goose, which is silly; the peacock, which is beautiful; the cuckoo, which has a monotonous voice and lays its eggs in other birds' nests; and the serpent, whose nature is too well-known for indictment. She is the goddess of advice and of money — of all things peculiarly interesting to women; and, of course, ever since the hapless judgment of Paris, when — as Hera — Juno was outbribed by Aphrodite, she has been the most jealous and unforgiving of the deities.

In short, Juno is all things to all women, and that is why the poet Ovid has Juno say that the month of June was named in her honor — June being the season of the year most favorable to marriages. "Prosperity to the man and happiness to the maid when married in June" was a proverb in ancient Rome. Multimillions of the sisterhood have put their maiden faith in it ever since, and the elder daughter of Richard K. Troy of Sutton Place and Palm Beach was no exception. She had always wanted a June wedding, and she got one — not quite, perhaps, as she had dreamed. But the calendar was right, she was dressed as a bride, and there was a ring — so the old saying came true, if only for a very short time.

Her father had named her Helen, for Richard K. Troy was that most dangerous of people, a practising sentimentalist. To Mr. Troy, in the beginning was the word; and since he had an easy vocabulary and a cliché for everything, he had made his fortune in the greeting-card business. His first child's name was a sentimental inspiration of his youth, and when Helen Troy grew to be a marvelously beautiful young woman, her father was not surprised; it was simply another proof, in the whole argument of his life, of the word made flesh.

He always regretted that he had not had the foresight to perform a similar service for his younger daugh-

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ter Effie, the selection of whose name he had imprudently left to his wife. Mrs. Troy had leaned heavily toward propriety; and Euphemia, the dictionary told her, signified "of good report." Effie indeed grew up to be well spoken of, but the trouble was she entered conversations very seldom, being plain and always looking as if she were about to get down on all fours. Effie was Mr. Troy's cross.

But Helen was the apple of his eye — "the golden apple," he liked to say whimsically. "You'll remember that was the real reason the Trojan War was fought, haha!" Peaceable as he was, Mr. Troy said it not without a glow; an army of young men had fought over Helen from the time she was beginning to bud above the waist, and she arrived at Junoesque maturity by stepping lightly over a battlefield littered with bloodied noses and broken hearts. Mr. Troy had a moment of uneasiness after Mrs. Troy died when Helen, the vigilant mother-eye finally lidded over, promptly trifled with the wrong kind of man. But Helen laughed and assured her father that she could handle the fellow, and Mr. Troy was fatuous enough to let the moment pass.

That was a mistake.

Victor Luz was a chunky young European with sprouting black eyebrows and really formidable hands. They were the hands of a peasant and he was ashamed of them, because his father — who was attached to one of the United Nations delegations — came from a Louvre of aristocrats and had long slim golden fingers like women's cigarette holders. Victor had come to the United States as a college student. At Princeton he had been persuaded to put his hands to use, and as he was agile and athletic, with a naturally lethal left hook, he had no difficulty making the boxing team. But intercollegiate competition brought out the depressing fact that when he was hurt, Luz forgot the rules and became a killing animal, gouging and punching wildly low and all but using his powerful teeth. In one bout he rolled to the mat with his opponent, a bewildered junior from Rutgers, and he was disqualified and dropped from the team. But he was charming and handsome, with continental manners and a great deal of money, and he was a social success from the moment he sublet a bachelor apartment on Park Avenue after his graduation. He made rare appearances at Lake Success, where he was known vaguely to have some connection with his country's delegation. But he was seen regularly at horse shows and hunt clubs and he was a favorite of café society — even being interviewed under his full name, which included a titular prefix, by Sherman Billingsley himself on the Stork Club television program.

Luz was introduced to the Troys by Henry Middleton Yates, who had known him at Princeton and now sold bonds for a Wall Street house. Yates had been in love with Helen Troy since his first crew-cut. He was one of

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the warriors whose nose had been bloodied, but his heart remained intact; being a born bond salesman, Henry was undiscourageable. Long after most of his rivals had consoled themselves with lesser prizes, he was still in dogged pursuit of the Troy beauty. Helen was fond of him; he was good-natured, good-looking, comfortably manageable, and he had just the right promise of static electricity; she might, in fact, have married him long before if the battle had still not warmed her blood a little and . . . of course . . . her mother had approved, which she had not. Henry was aware of the two impediments to his happiness, but he was patient; he knew time would remove both of them. When Mrs. Troy died, Henry was ready. He threw Victor Luz at Helen.

Henry was a planner, and his plan depended on his knowledge of Helen and his shrewd appraisal of her state of mind. Adoration at arm's length would not satisfy her forever, and there were signs that the Trojan wars were palling. What she needed, he reasoned, was a final passage of arms, in which her appetite for conquest would be glutted. Victor Luz, thought Henry, was just the man for the job. Luz could hardly fail to be smitten, and Helen would lead him on automatically. There was no danger that she would fall in love with him or that his name would tempt her to do something silly: Luz was too foreign for Helen's emotional tastes and she was too sensible to sell her freedom for a title. He would amuse her for a while; then she would drop him, expecting him to accept his dismissal, as the others had done, with a broken heart but a sporting smile. What she would not know until it was too late was that Luz, when balked, forgot the rules. So he would be a bad loser, and the whole episode would end disagreeably. Henry was sure such an experience at this period in Helen's life would drop her, finally and gratefully, into his lap.

And that was a mistake also, even though it all came to pass exactly as Henry hoped.

He brought Victor Luz to the Troy house, Luz was enchanted, Helen was interested, they began to see a great deal of each other, Luz pressed an ardent courtship, Helen played with him until her interest dribbled away, she broke it off — and Luz hung on. Helen looked at him then really for the first time. There was something alarming in the quality of his persistence, the quivering intensity of a sealed tank building up a pressure. He did not hang on like a gentleman, unobtrusively. He took to following her, threatening her escorts with violence, sending her wild notes, hounding her on the telephone, proposing suicide pacts, weeping on the garden wall outside her bedroom window, jumping out at her from doorways in broad daylight and falling at her feet. The climax came one night at El Morocco, when Luz made a scene so outrageous and humiliating that Helen fled in tears — into Henry's arms.

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As far as Henry Middleton Yates was concerned, that was the end of the play. Unfortunately, Victor Luz was following a script of his own.

The morning after the scandalous scene in the night club, Richard K. Troy was peacefully finishing his decaffeinized coffee when his younger daughter Euphemia came in and said with unfamiliar vivacity, "Victor Luz is in the library asking for you."

"That fellow?" said Mr. Troy, frowning. "What's he want?"

"I don't know, Daddy," said Effie. "But he looks awfully stiff and correct. Maybe he wants to apologize for last night."

"I suppose I ought to punch him in the nose," said her father helplessly. "Where's Helen?"

"She won't see him. Anyway, she's in the garden with Henry Yates. I'll bet Henry would punch him in the nose!"

"I'm entirely capable of handling my children's affairs," said Mr. Troy, sounding the reverse; and he went to the library unhappily.

Victor Luz was seated on the edge of a chair, knees spread slightly, big hands grasping suède gloves and a Homburg over the head of a furled umbrella. His dark skin was quite yellow. He rose immediately.

"See here, Luz —" began Mr. Troy with a scowl.

"Mr. Troy," said Luz, "I call this morning for two purposes. I wished to abase myself before your daughter for having been so gauche as to make a public scene last night. But she will not see me. Therefore, sir, I address my apologies to you."

"Well, ah, yes. Yes, I see," said Mr. Troy.

"The second purpose of my visit is to seek your permission to ask your daughter's hand in marriage," said Victor Luz. "I am madly in love with Helen, Mr. Troy. I cannot —"

"— live without her. Yes, yes," sighed Mr. Troy. "It's surprising, though, how many of you fellows manage to survive. Mr. Luz, my only mission in life is to see my daughters happy. If Helen thinks you'd do it, it doesn't matter what I think. Go ahead and ask her."

"Ah, you are a great man!" cried Luz joyfully.

"Not at all," said Mr. Troy with a grin. "I'm just passing the buck to more capable hands."

But Luz was rapidly soliloquizing, "I have spoken to her of my love, of her beauty, and so on, but the word marriage . . . How could she have failed to misunderstand? I'll ask her now!"

At this moment the library door opened and the fair Helen appeared, followed by Henry Middleton Yates. Behind Henry hovered Effie, trembling.

Luz blinked as if at an unbearable radiance. He went to her swiftly, engulfing her hand. "Helen, I must speak to you!"

Helen laughed, withdrawing her hand and wiping it carefully with her handkerchief. Then she went up to

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her father and she said, "Dad, Henry has something to say to you."

"Henry," said Mr. Troy. "Oh! Oh, yes, yes."

"I've asked Helen to marry me, Mr. Troy," said Henry Middleton Yates, "and she's said yes. Is it kappa-zootic with you?"

Mr. Troy looked bewildered. For a cry came from an unexpected quarter, the throat of his daughter Effie. After that single noise, Effie became silent and mousier than ever; then she scurried down the hall as if cats were after her. Helen looked thoughtful and Henry Yates blank.

It was all too much for Mr. Troy, especially since in the very next instant Henry Yates was on his back on the library floor, giving a credible imitation of a man fighting for his life. He had been bowled over by the nine-pin head of Victor Luz, and Luz now had his great hands about Henry's throat and was banging Henry's head against the floor. Mr. Troy was conscious of his daughter Helen making some unpleasantly shrill sounds.

"Descendant of body lice!" shouted Luz, his dark skin now magenta. "You will never have her! I will kill her first!"

Henry gurgled something indignant, and Helen whacked Luz's head with the handle of his umbrella. Mr. Troy found himself growing strong with anger, and then he found himself throttling Victor Luz so vigorously that, between the grip on his throat and the blows on his head, Luz released his hold on poor Henry Yates and fell back blanched and impotent.

Helen was on her knees beside her gasping cavalier, crooning solace. Luz got to his feet, fumbling for his umbrella. He did not look at either of them.

"I said I would kill her," he said in a bubbly voice to no one in particular, "and if she marries Yates I will."

"But that isn't all of it, Mr. Queen," Mr. Troy said a month later. "When my prospective son-in-law got to his feet, he knocked the fellow kicking, and you'd have thought that would be the end of it. But it was only the beginning."

"More threats?" said Ellery. "Or actual attempts on your daughter's life?"

"No, no, it was the beginning of an entirely new relationship. I don't pretend to understand young people nowadays," said Mr. Troy, using his handkerchief. "In my day he'd have been horsewhipped or put in jail, and no amount of crawling on his — I beg your pardon, Miss Porter, is it? — but this has really got me down."

"I don't think we follow, Mr. Troy," said Nikki.

"Why, he no sooner recovered from Henry's knockout than Luz was a changed man. Butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. Sucking dove — ate humble pie as if he enjoyed it. Apologized practically on his knees. Positively embarrassed me. The next day he sent Helen a bushel of orchids with the inscription, *With Best Wishes for the Coming Event, Your friend, Victor*

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Luz — he wouldn't go very far in the greeting-card business, I'm afraid, haha! — and he sent Henry Yates a case of sixty-five-year-old cognac, and the result of all this was that within a week Helen had forgiven him and Henry was saying he wasn't such a bad fellow after all."

"And within two weeks?" asked Ellery. "Because it's evident it didn't stop there."

"You're darned right it didn't," said Mr. Troy indignantly. "Within two weeks Helen had invited him to the wedding, because Luz gave a big party at the Versailles at which Helen and Henry were guests of honor and, as I understand it, spent most of the evening proposing champagne toasts to their happiness."

"How very sweet," exclaimed Nikki.

"Mr. Troy, I think, Nikki," said Ellery, "detects a sour note."

"Mr. Queen, I yield to no man in loving-kindness," said Mr. Troy earnestly, "but I tell you this man isn't to be trusted. I consider myself a judge of character, and I saw his face when he heard that Helen was going to marry Henry Yates. There was murder there, and not good clean murder, either, Mr. Queen."

"— and he's going to be at your daughter's wedding" — murmured Ellery.

"He's not only going to be at it," said Mr. Troy, waving, "he's to be best man!"

There was a silence.

"Oh, dear," said Nikki. "How did he get to be that?"

"He's stuck close to Henry ever since the fight in my library," said Mr. Troy wildly, "and apparently he's made Henry feel that the only way Henry can show there are no hard feelings is to let him be best man at the wedding. I've appealed to Helen, but she's walking on clouds these days and she thinks it's simply too romantic! I tell you, it's enough to —"

"When and where is the wedding, Mr. Troy?" asked Ellery thoughtfully. "And what kind of wedding will it be?"

"Quiet, Mr. Queen, very quiet. My wife died recently and of course a big church wedding is out of the question. I wanted Helen to wait a few months, but June starts on Friday, and she insists on a June wedding — June weddings *are* lucky, of course — and she won't wait another year till next June. So it's to be at home, with a very small and select guest list — immediate family and a few friends — this coming Saturday. . . . I'd have gone to the police, Mr. Queen," said Mr. Troy glumly, "except that . . . Would you consider coming to the wedding to sort of keep an eye on things?"

"I really don't think you have much to worry about, Mr. Troy," said Ellery with a smile, "but if it will ease your mind — all right."

"Thank you!"

"But wouldn't this man Luz," asked Nikki, "be suspicious of the presence of a complete stranger?"

"Let him!" said Mr. Troy violently.

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"Mr. Troy's right, Nikki. If Luz knows he's being watched, he's much less likely to try anything. If, of course," added Ellery indulgently, "he has any such intention."

Indulgent or not, Ellery did not wait for Saturday to make the acquaintance of Victor Luz. He set about getting to know him immediately, by remote control. In addition, Ellery confided in Inspector Queen, and the Inspector assigned Sergeant Thomas Velie of his staff to special duty, which consisted in following Mr. Luz conspicuously wherever he went. The Sergeant executed his assignment as ordered, grumbling at the affront to his professional pride. As a result, by the day of the Troy-Yates nuptials, Ellery had an approximate knowledge of Mr. Luz's life and habits, and Mr. Luz had the certain knowledge that he was being shadowed. As for the dossier on Luz, Ellery found nothing in it of interest beyond repeated evidences that Luz had a beastly temper and went berserk occasionally, and that he came from a long line of European noblemen with a history of elegant sadism and, in the older days, refined savagery toward peasants, *pour le sport.* For the rest, Luz lived well and honorably on his father's money, and his personal life was neither more nor less questionable than that of any other young Park Avenue bachelor.

Nevertheless, because he was thorough, Ellery arranged for Sergeant Velie to attend the wedding, too.

"Acting the part of a detective," Ellery explained.

"What d'ye mean, acting?" growled the Sergeant.

"Private detective, Sergeant, ostensibly watching the wedding presents."

"Oh," said Sergeant Velie; but he went to the wedding glowering.

The June day was as rare as any bride could have yearned for. It was a garden wedding, with the high Troy walls invisible under thousands of roses and the river invisible beyond the walls. The bride's gown was by Mainbocher, the floral decorations and bouquets were by Max Schling, the catering was by the Ritz, the presiding clergyman was a bishop, and there were no more than three dozen wedding guests. And Juno Regina smiled down from the battlements of heaven.

As far as Ellery could see, he was merely wasting an afternoon healthily. He and Velie, in striped trousers, had arrived early and they had elaborately searched the house and grounds, making sure that Mr. Luz saw them at their labors. Mr. Luz had paled slightly on seeing the heroic figure of Sergeant Velie, and he had made some remark to the bride's father.

"Oh, detectives," said Mr. Troy, trying to sound careless; but he turned away nervously.

Luz had bitten his lip and then, impeccable in his cutaway, he had gone upstairs to the rooms set aside for the groom. When he found Ellery at his heels, he ground his teeth. El-

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lery waited patiently outside the door. When Luz, after a long time, emerged with Henry Yates, Ellery followed them downstairs.

"Who the devil is that?" he heard Yates ask Luz.

"A detective, Mr. Troy said."

"What on earth for?"

In the crowded room downstairs Ellery nodded to Sergeant Velie, and Sergeant Velie collided with Luz.

"Here, fellow! What are you doing?" cried Luz angrily.

"Pardon," said the Sergeant; and he reported to Ellery that their man was not heeled.

Neither man took his eyes off Luz for an instant.

When the ceremony began, Ellery was in the front row of chairs, directly behind Luz. Sergeant Velie was in the doorway of the reception room off the terrace, one hand tucked under his coat in Napoleon's classic pose.

Ellery concentrated on the best man, letting the bishop's murmur trickle over him. It had all long since begun to seem unreal and silly. Luz stood a little behind and to the side of the groom, looking properly solemn, and quite conscious of the watchful stranger behind him. Yates's big body was between him and Helen Troy; he could not possibly have reached her without interception. And the bride was too beautiful in her wedding gown to give credence to thoughts of death — far more beautiful than any woman there, in particular her maid of honor, who was her sister Euphemia and seemed precariously on the verge of tears. And Mr. Troy, to the side of the bride, kept his beetled glance directly on the best man, as if challenging him to violate the loveliness of the moment by so much as a thought.

Too silly for words . . .

"And now the ring, if you please," the bishop was saying.

The groom turned to the best man, and the best man's fingers automatically went to the left-hand lower pocket of his vest. They probed. They probed more. They stopped probing, petrified. A horrified titter ran through the garden. Victor Luz began to search frantically through all his pockets. The bishop glanced heavenward.

"For — for God's sake, Victor," whispered Henry Yates. "This is no time for a gag!"

"Gag!" choked Luz. "I assure you . . . I could have sworn . . ."

"Maybe you left it in your topcoat!"

"Yes. Yes! But where . . . ?"

Effie Troy stretched her skinny neck their way and whispered, "Your topcoat's in the clothes closet in the upstairs hall, Victor. I put it there myself when you got here."

"Hurry up," groaned the groom. "Of all the idiot . . . Darling, I'm so sorry . . . Bishop, please forgive . . ."

"It's quite all right, young man," sighed the bishop.

"Won't be a minute," stammered Luz. "So terribly sorry . . ."

Ellery pinched his nose, so when Victor Luz disappeared in the recep-

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tion room Sergeant Velie clumped after him.

When Luz emerged from the house Ellery quietly rose and made his way to the terrace, where the Sergeant stood waiting. Luz was advancing across the lawn holding a ring aloft shamefacedly, and everyone was smiling. He handed it to Henry Yates with careful ceremony, looking relieved. The bishop, looking martyred, resumed.

"Now if you will repeat after me . . ."

"What did Luz do, Sergeant?" asked Ellery.

"Went upstairs to a hall closet, fished around in a man's topcoat, came up with the ring —"

"That's all he did?"

"That's all. Just beat it back downstairs with it."

They watched.

"It's all over!"

"And I had to miss my Turkish bath for this." Sergeant Velie sounded disgusted.

Ellery hurried out onto the lawn. The bride and groom were surrounded by laughing people, kissing and being kissed, shaking hands, everyone talking at once. The newly minted Mrs. Henry Middleton Yates had never looked more mythically happy, her sister Effie more realistically plain, the groom more dazedly successful, the bride's father more puzzled and relieved. As for Luz, he had quietly congratulated the bride and groom and he was now on the edge of the crowd, smiling and saying something to the white-cheeked Effie, whose eyes were tragically on her sister's husband. Mr. Troy was conversing animatedly with the bishop. Waiters were beginning to wheel out veritable floats of tables, and others were beginning to circulate with portable bars. Two photographers were busily setting up. The sun was mild and the flowers sugared the air. A barge beyond the river wall hooted its good wishes.

Ellery shrugged. Now that Helen Troy was safely Mrs. Yates, the gyrations of the past two hours seemed infantile. He would have to see Mr. Troy . . .

"Darling! What's the matter?"

The voice was the groom's. Ellery craned. The mob around the couple had stopped milling with a curious suddenness. Mr. Troy and the bishop had turned inquiringly.

With violence, Ellery shoved through the crowd.

"Henry . . ." The bride was leaning against her husband. Her cheeks were chalky under the make-up. She had a hand to her eyes.

"What is it, dearest? . . . *Helen!*"

"Catch her!" Ellery shouted.

But the bride was already on the grass in a broken white pile, staring into the sun.

Inspector Queen was definitely a menace that day. He had an unusually bitter altercation with Dr. Prouty of the medical examiner's office, a few searing words for the bewildered Sergeant Velie, and deathly subtempera-

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tures for his son. Having already been exposed to absolute zero in the person of Richard K. Troy before the poor man was put to bed by his physician, Ellery was thoroughly refrigerated. He hung about the proceedings like a fugitive drip of stalactite, ignored. Effie Troy was in her room in hysterics, in care of a nurse; Henry Yates sat on a chair in the reception room vacantly, drinking brandy by the water glass and not even looking up when addressed; Victor Luz was in Troy's library chainsmoking under the murderous eye of Sergeant Velie; there was no one to talk to, no one at all. Ellery wandered miserably about, yearning for Nikki Porter.

About the only thing everyone agreed on without argument was that it had been the quickest June marriage in society history.

Finally, after a century, the Inspector beckoned.

"Yes, Dad!" Ellery was at his father's side like an arrow. "Why the freeze-out?"

Inspector Queen looked positively hostile.

"I still don't know how it happened." Ellery sounded dazed. "She just dropped, Dad. She was dead in a few minutes."

"Seven minutes from the time the poison was administered," the Inspector said frigidly.

"How? She hadn't had time to eat or drink anything!"

"Directly into the bloodstream. With this." And the Inspector opened his fist. "And you let him!"

"*Her wedding ring?*"

The ring gleamed on his father's palm. It was a plain, very broad, and massive gold band.

"You can handle it. The sting's removed."

Ellery shook his head, then he seized the ring and scrutinized it fiercely. He looked up, incredulous.

"That's right," nodded the Inspector. "A poison ring. Hidden automatic spring on the inner surface of the band that ejects a hollow needle point under pressure. Like the fang of a snake. And this was loaded, brother. Right after the ceremony everybody was congratulating her, kissing her, shaking her hand. Quite a gimmick. The handshaker exerts just the right amount of pressure on the hand wearing the ring, and wham — a dead bride in seven minutes. If she felt the sting, she was too excited to call attention to it. I've heard of the kiss of death, but the handshake of death — that's a new one!"

"Not so new," muttered Ellery. "Poison rings go back at least to the time of Demosthenes. And Hannibal, who killed himself with one. But those weren't like this. This is the *anello della morte* with reverse Venetian. In the medieval model the hollow point was in the bezel and scratched the person with whom the wearer of the ring was shaking hands. This one pricks the wearer."

"Medieval. Europe." The Inspector sounded very grim; he was an incurable softie, and the sight of the beauti-

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ful young corpse in her wedding gown under the June sun had infuriated him. "It's an antique; I've had it expertized. This is the kind of cute gadget a European blueblood like Luz might have had in his family locker for centuries."

"It's also the kind of thing you might pick up in a Third Avenue pawnshop," said Ellery. "Is it an exact duplicate — except for the mechanism — of the ring Yates had bought?"

"I haven't been able to get much out of Yates, but I gather it's not quite the same. It wouldn't be. Yates's ring, of course, is gone. The killer counted on the excitement and tension of the ceremony preventing Yates from noticing that the poison ring was a bit different when Luz handed it to him. Yates bought his ring two weeks ago and showed it to all of them except Helen, so the killer had plenty of time to dig up a poison ring resembling it . . . if he didn't have one handy all the time."

"When did Yates turn the regular ring over to Luz?"

"Last night. Luz claims, of course, that he knows nothing about this poison ring. He says — he *says* — when he went upstairs to the hall closet during the ceremony and fished around in his topcoat and felt the ring, he just took it out and hurried downstairs with it without taking a good look at it, and Velie confirms that."

"And then he handed it to Yates, who may have palmed it," said Ellery.

"Yates? The *groom?* Palmed it? I don't —"

"Suppose Henry Yates had the poison ring concealed in his hand. Luz hands him the innocent ring; Yates palms it and puts the poison ring on Helen's finger."

The Inspector seemed to pop from all directions. "Are you out of your mind? That boy want to kill the girl he was marrying? And what a girl! And in such a way!"

"I don't say he did, but you'll find," said Ellery, "that Helen Troy came into a wad of money, the instant she got married, by the will of her mother, who had an independent fortune. And Henry Yates is, after all, merely a bond salesman — a very smart bond salesman, incidentally, or he'd never have snagged the Troy girl. And you can't ignore the corollary fact that such a time and method of murdering his bride would give Yates the perfect fall guy . . . the man who handed him the ring, the man who had been rejected by the bride, the man who had actually threatened to kill her if she married Yates. Not to mention the psychological advantages to Yates in picking such a time for his crime —"

Inspector Queen said through his dentures: "You know what your trouble is, son? A degenerate imagination."

"It's not imagination at all. It's logic."

"It's rot!"

"And then there's Effie Troy," Ellery continued absently. "Effie is hopelessly in love with Yates — a

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strabismic jackass could see that. And it was Effie, by her own admission, who hung Luz's topcoat in the upper hall closet. Velie says none of the wedding guests or hired help had access to that closet, Dad. He had the staircase in view the whole time and he says only Luz and the immediate family used those stairs from the time Luz arrived at the house."

The Inspector fixed his son with a stern and glittering eye. "Then you don't believe Luz did this?"

"I don't see anything that pins it on him. There are at least two other possible theories, either of which makes as much sense."

"To you on cloud eighty-eight," rasped his father. "To my simple brain it's simple. Luz threatened to kill Helen Troy if she married Yates. That's motive —"

"One motive," said Ellery patiently. "There are at least two others."

"As best man Luz had charge of the wedding ring and had the best chance to substitute the poison ring for the real one. That's opportunity."

"One opportunity, and only equally as good as Effie Troy's and Henry Yates's," mumbled Ellery.

"Luz shook hands with the bride right after the ceremony —"

"So did a dozen or more other people."

The Inspector glared, turning an eggplant color. "If no evidence to the contrary turns up in the next twenty-four hours," he snarled, "father of a genius or no father of a genius, I'm arresting Luz for the murder of that girl!"

It must be faced: Ellery did not shine in the Troy-Yates-Luz case. In a lesser way, that June wedding was as unlucky for him as for the bride. Not only had he failed to prevent the tragedy he had been commissioned to guard against, not only was he an honorless prophet in his own house, but he found that he had suddenly lost caste in the eyes of his secretary. Nikki was Juno's messenger to her mortal sex; licit love and blessed betrothal had no more fanatical advocate on earth. The murder of a beautiful bride on her wedding day — more, with the first holy kiss of her husband still warm on her lips — struck Miss Porter as a more inhuman crime than the drawing and quartering of newborn babes. She was all for applying vigilante law to the monster Luz — she was positive he was a monster — and after reading the details in the Sunday paper she came to the Queen apartment, notwithstanding it was her day off, expressly to whip Mr. Queen into the proper bloodthirsty frame of mind . . . after telling him, of course, what she thought of his bungling.

"How could you have let it happen, Ellery?" cried Miss Porter scathingly. "Under your celebrated nose! When you were supposed to be *watching*."

"Surely," said Mr. Queen wearily, "I can be forgiven for not anticipating that somebody was going to bump

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her off with a wedding ring? Even geniuses — to quote a certain relative of mine — can't be expected to think of wedding rings as dangerous weapons. We're not living in the days of the Borgias, Nikki." Ellery jumped up and began to walk about violently. "It was diabolical. The whole body of myth and folk belief that surrounds the institution of marriage got in the way. Did you ever hear of the medical finger?"

"What an odd way to change the subject," said Miss Porter coldly.

"It is the subject. The medical finger was what centuries ago the English called the third finger — not counting the thumb; their leeches used that finger in stirring drugs and potions —"

"Educational," began Nikki.

"— and it was believed that that finger was connected directly with the heart by a special nerve and that poisonous substance could come in contact with it without giving a warning. And that's the finger, Nikki, wedding rings are worn on."

"And poetic," finished Nikki, "but, considering what happened, a lot of malarkey, don't you agree? And it hardly puts Victor Luz where he belongs, does it? Why isn't he in the clink? Why did the Inspector grill poor Effie Troy and that poor, poor Henry Yates last night till all hours? What is everybody waiting for? — What's the matter?"

For Ellery had stopped in the middle of the room, stealthy-still and staring as if he were peering into the fourth dimension and being revolted by what he saw there.

"Ellery, what's wrong?"

Ellery came back to the solar system with an unmistakable shudder. "Wrong?" he said feebly. "Did I say anything is wrong?"

"No, but you looked —"

"Electrified, Nikki. I'm always electrified by my own stupidity. Get Dad on the phone," he muttered. "Try headquarters. I've got to talk to him . . . God help me."

"He's tied up," Nikki said when she had put the phone down. "He'll call you back."

Ellery backed into a chair and fumbled unseeingly for his cigarettes. "Nikki, a premise of this case has been that the pressure of a handshake, exerted a certain way, was required to release the spring in the poison ring. When you shake hands with somebody, which hand do you offer?"

"Which hand do I offer?" said Nikki. "My right, of course."

"And which hand does the other person offer?"

"His right. He has to."

"*But on which hand does a woman wear her wedding ring?*"

"Her . . . left."

"Merest detail, you see. Trivial. The only thing is, it solves the case and, of course, I forgot it until just now." From his tone, Nikki expected him to produce scorpions and iron-tipped whips. "How could a normal right-handed handshake have released that poisoned needle, when the ring was on Helen's left hand?"

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"Impossible," said Nikki excitedly. "So it wasn't done by a handshake at all!"

"That's not the alternative, Nikki — it had to be done by a handshake. The alternative is that, since the poisoned ring was on Helen's left hand, *it was her left hand which was shaken.*"

Nikki looked blank.

"Don't you see? In the press of people around her just after the ceremony, the murderer came up and extended his left hand, forcing Helen to extend hers."

"So what?"

"So the murderer was left-handed."

Miss Porter considered this. "Come, come," she said at last, with no respect at all. "Being a wedding ring, it *had* to be on her left hand, therefore the killer *had* to give her a left-handed handshake, therefore he isn't necessarily left-handed at all."

The master, sorely tried as he was, managed a smile. "His crime, Nikki, necessitated a left-handed handshake. The brain is modified and restrained by the nature of the machine it runs. If a right-handed man were planning a crime that depended on the use of a hand, he'd instinctively plan a crime that depended on the use of his right hand. The very conception of a left-handed crime indicates a left-handed criminal." Ellery shrugged. "When the bishop asked for the ring during the ceremony and the groom turned to his best man, *his best man's hand automatically went to the lower* left-hand *pocket of his vest.* Had he been right-handed, he would have searched, or pretended to search, his right-hand pocket, because a right-handed man — when he has a free choice of sides and there are no conditioning factors present — will automatically reach for a right-side pocket. Victor Luz automatically reached for a left-side pocket, so he's left-handed.

"So for once," Ellery sighed, "logic comes to the support of a circumstantial case. Luz meant his threat, and left the ring in his topcoat deliberately to make it look later as if someone else could have switched rings, not merely himself. Dad was ri —"

The telephone rang.

"Ellery?" It was Inspector Queen's sharp voice.

"Dad —" began Ellery, inhaling manfully.

But the Inspector said, "I told you Luz was our man. Dumb as hell, besides. We traced that poison ring to an antique shop on Madison Avenue, and when Luz was faced with the evidence he broke. I've just got through blotting the ink on his signed confession. All that fancy big-brain stuff about Henry Yates and Effie Troy! What did you want, Ellery?"

Ellery swallowed. Then he said, "Nothing, Dad," humbly and hung up.

Watch EQ on TV

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Twenty years ago Mr. A. B. Cox, alias Francis Iles, alias Anthony Berkeley, revealed his criminological credo, his detectival doctrine. "I personally am convinced," he wrote, "that the days of the old crime-puzzle pure and simple, relying entirely upon plot and without the added attractions of character, style or even humour, are, if not numbered, at any rate in the hands of the auditors; and that the detective-story is in process of developing into the novel with a detective or crime interest, holding its reader less by mathematical than by psychological ties. The puzzle element will no doubt remain, but it will become a puzzle of character, rather than a puzzle of time, place, motive and opportunity . . . There is a complication of emotion, drama, psychology and adventure behind the most ordinary murder in real life, the possibilities of which for fictional purposes the conventional detective-story misses completely."

Thus spake the man who wrote MALICE AFORETHOUGHT *one year after he had issued his manhunting manifesto, and* BEFORE THE FACT *two years after. Yes, it can be said without danger of denial that Mr. Cox-Iles-Berkeley proved his point — to the hilt.*

Here is a short story that Anthony Berkeley wrote six years after he first voiced his private-eye philosophy. It illustrates all his 'tec tenets — unless in the last decade or so Mr. Berkeley has changed his mind, which we seriously doubt. It also illustrates how expertly an English writer can use American slang, when he sets his mind to it.

THE POLICEMAN ONLY TAPS ONCE

by ANTHONY BERKELEY

IT WAS a dull sort of day, cloudy and raw like they get it over here, so I thought I'd bump off Myrtle. She had it coming to her anyways.

Besides, the way I'd figured it, any dame with a dial like hers'd be happier stiff. Myrtle certainly was a terrible looker. That was why I'd picked her. I'd had it all figured out.

There's no need to say how I'd got me into the position that a vacation from the States was going to be pretty good for my health; no, there's no need to say what my racket had been over there, except that it was a mighty good racket while it lasted. It was a private racket too. The bulls were never wise to me. They had no reason. It was a private racket, and it wasn't against any law, not even the Mann Act. I can tell you, it makes a guy feel good to know he doesn't

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figure on any police records; and I know that, because a pretty good friend of mine was a headquarters dick, and if there'd been any breeze stirring I'd have had the dope good and quick. I kept him sweet for that reason. But there was never a breath.

I was born in Connecticut when Connecticut was really tough. And was it tough! Believe you me, a guy that was born in Connecticut round about then wouldn't need any asbestos suit in the next world. Hell'd feel a sweet, cool breeze to him after Connecticut.

My old man was a cop, and I will say he did his darnedest to keep me on the level. "Boy," he'd say, as he whacked me with his night stick, "I'm telling you, it pays to be honest. There's more pickings to be got in one week by an honest cop who knows his racket than the tough guys can collect in a year. Think of it, boy. There's not a holdup nor a bumping off in this town but I get my rake-off, and I'm only a plain cop. When they make me a lieutenant, I'll get double. That's pretty good, ain't it? You take my advice, boy, and stay honest."

He never got to be a lieutenant though. He slipped up on a big schemozzle there was one night between Joe Spinelli's boys and a bunch of guys that were trying to horn in on Joe's graft. The old man let on that he'd seen one of Joe's gang somewhere around that evening and Joe rang up the Captain and had him broke. The old man was sore at that, but Joe wouldn't have him back in the force; he said he wouldn't have a man he couldn't trust taking his dough.

Anyways, I'd gone my own road before the old man got in that jam. Before I could button my own pants I'd decided on my racket, and I was working it before I'd bought my first tuxedo. I worked it for pretty nearly fifteen years, too, up and down the country. It was a swell racket while it lasted, and it never got me in bad with the bulls. There was no reason.

At that, I only quit just in time. If I'd left the quay five minutes later I'd have left it headfirst into the water. As it was, I got up the gangway with just enough time to hide in the bilge, and the boys never thought of looking there. I stayed there two days, telling myself that if the rats could stick it I could, but the boys had gone ashore after all and I needn't have worried. I heard afterwards they'd made sure I wasn't on board, so I got to England with no one knowing.

There wasn't going to be any trouble about getting in, I knew that. There was no reason. My passport was all in order, and what it said was true. I was a private citizen of the United States, and nothing known against me. Independent means it said too, but maybe that wasn't so good. What with having to leave in a hurry, and the racket going stale during the last year or two, I was pretty short of dough. I reckoned I had enough to last me a few weeks, living not too high, but after that I'd have to get busy. The old racket wouldn't be any good either. You couldn't work that in England.

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Well, the way I was fixed it meant I'd got to find a new one, and mighty quick at that. The scare I'd had had kind of sobered me up. I'd got to get hold of enough dough to stay away for quite a while.

The rest of the trip I spent figuring how I could think up a new racket. It had to be a cast-iron one so far as the bulls went, though these English bulls aren't the tough babies like we've got at home; still, I didn't want to get in bad with them and maybe get shot out of the country before I'd had time to sweeten up. And it had to be a sure-fire starter, because I'd got no time to waste.

Before we docked I'd found what I was looking for. It was a pretty old racket, but when all's said and done the old rackets are still the best so long as you can pull them. I'd find some old dame who'd got dough of her own and a face like the back view of a cab horse, and marry her. There's always some dames that look so terrible that no guy can put up with a dial like that over the coffee pot of a morning even for the sake of the dough behind it, and I wasn't going to be particular. That was the plan I worked out, and the more I looked it over the better I liked it. I figured it oughtn't to be a difficult one to pull too, because as long as I can remember I'd always been the snake's step-ins with the dames: it seemed like they just couldn't say no to me.

Well, now, the way I thought it out was this. It wasn't going to be too good to make a play for anyone young. I didn't want any snoopy parents or guardians having their say-so; and however glad they may be to get a lousy looker off their hands, in-laws can be just hell once they've got the victim hooked, strapped, and delivered. No, not even if she'd got dough in her own rights I couldn't see myself putting up with the in-laws dropping in to breakfast just when they wanted, with me not daring to so much as sneeze at them in case I got cut off with a dime.

That meant I'd got to look out for a dame old enough to have outgrown her family. That didn't worry me any. The older she was, the easier she ought to be. After a while a dame kind of gives up hope, and to offer her any then is just like feeding honey to a bear: she'll make just one jump and land at your side with all four feet. And if you begin pulling a line of sales talk about gen-u-ine gold wedding rings, you'll wonder what that is frisking round your feet like a puppy.

I figured it wasn't going to be difficult to meet up with the kind of dame I wanted. It was summertime, and I worked it out pretty well all I needed to do was to stay in some big dump by the sea and keep an eye on the swell hotels. So I asked a guy in the hotel in London what he reckoned was the real classy place to stay in by the sea in England, and he plumped for Folkestone. So I packed my grips and booked my ticket to Folkestone that same day.

Well, Folkestone sure is class all right. The Leas looked to me just

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lousy with millionaires, though maybe some of them weren't so sticky with dough as they looked. I registered in a real nice little hotel that the guy in London had told me about, and went out to have a look round.

Well, there's no need to write about the next few days. What I liked about Folkestone was that there was always plenty of wind. When I get a good line I stick to it, and I needn't say more than that my hat blew into about half a dozen laps a day, till I got real cute at making it land just where I wanted.

And was it easy? I'm telling you. I didn't get a single freeze when I sat down on the bench beside them and began spieling about the difference between Folkestone and Arizona.

But when I began asking the questions, there was something wrong with all of them. Either they weren't staying at one of the really swell hotels, or it was out of their class, or there was something wrong with the way their dough was tied up. I wouldn't of believed there could be so many difficulties, when the dames themselves were so willing. I was beginning to wonder would I ever find the right one.

And then I found Myrtle.

The way it happened was like this.

I'd been having tea in the swellest hotel of the lot just the day before, and keeping my eyes pretty wide open, too. Sitting over by one of the pillars was a big fat dame who looked just fierce. In fact, I don't mind saying that she looked so fierce I passed her over at first, though goodness knows I was getting kind of desperate. She had a sort of square face, with what looked like a couple of dozen chins under it, and it was the color of the underside of a pumpkin pie that's been made by a cook who's just been stoking the furnace with her bare hands and forgotten to wash them, and she hadn't tried to cover it, not even with a speck of powder.

That was bad enough, but to add to it she was dressed kind of mannish. Leastways, she had on one of those flat black felt hats jammed down on her short, gray hair and a kind of square-cut coat of some darned dull gray stuff, and a short skirt to match, and a white silk waist, and a black, knitted four-in-hand. She looked just fierce.

So when I found myself sitting on the next bench to hers the morning after, I don't mind admitting I kind of shuddered once or twice before I let fly with the derby. I had to keep telling myself that beggars can't be choosers, and if old man Henry VIII could stick it, I could: though I will say for that guy, when he didn't like it, he knew what to do with it. So I kind of breathed a prayer and braced myself up.

The shot was a beauty, and the derby landed slick as a coot. There was certainly plenty of lap for a landing ground, but even so it was a nifty shot.

"Say, lady," I said, doing my stuff, "I certainly beg your pardon. That sure was dumb of me. I ought to of known by this time I should have

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been grabbing it with both hands, sitting here."

She handed it back, and it seemed to me there was a grim kind of look in her eye; but I couldn't be sure, and anyways, I hadn't finished my lines.

"But perhaps it warn't such an ill wind after all, ma'm," I says, pulling the Arizona line of talk. "Not if it allows me to make your honored acquaintance. It sure is dull, setting here alone; and if you'll pardon the liberty, it looks like you're in the same boat. Perhaps we might spend half an hour in talking together? Ships that pass in the night, as the poet says: though it's certainly day with us." I stood looking kind of humble and questioning, like I did when all the other dames almost grabbed me and pulled me down beside them.

But Myrtle always was different. "My good man," she said, looking me up and down, "if you mean, may you sit on this bench, it belongs to the Corporation, not me. I have no say in the matter." And she kind of gives a cocky little snigger.

"That's certainly kind of you, ma'm," I said, sitting down. "The seat may belong to the Corporation, but while you're on it you've got the right to say who may share it with you, and I take it kindly that you let me. 'Way back in Arizona, where I come from, we never force our company where it's not wanted."

"So you come from Arizona?" she said, in a sort of friendly way. She was real English, all right; she had the proper dude accent. I could tell she was a lady, whatever she looked like.

"I sure do, ma'm. Li'l old Arizona. Gee, it seems a long way away from here." And I heaved a sigh.

"My dear man," said the dame, "it *is* a long way from here."

Well, we didn't seem to be getting anywheres, so I thought I'd better liven things up with a compliment or two. I've found that's a thing a dame will always swallow. Even when a compliment on her dial would sound like a bad joke, she'll always be pleased to have one somewhere else. So I took a look at Myrtle's short fat legs in thick gray wool stockings, ending in outsize Oxfords, and said:

"If you'll pardon the liberty, ma'm, it certainly is a treat to see a neat pair of ankles. Way back in Arizona ——"

"Hey!" she said. Just that. "Hey!"

"Ma'm?"

"If you're working up to the confidence trick, my good man, you can spare your breath."

"Ma'm!" I said. Well, it kind of took me aback.

"If you weren't — if you were just being infernally impertinent, I apologize," said Myrtle, and sniggered again.

I saw I'd made a mistake. I ought never to have made a pass at her at all. I might have known, from her hat. I thought I'd better beat it before she called a cop, so I jumped up and acted sore.

"Ma'm," I said, "it's for me to apologize. I see I should not have presoomed on the accident of the wind blowing my hat ——"

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"So it was the wind, was it?" she broke in like a flash.

"Certainly it was the wind," I said.

"You lie," she said. "There isn't any wind this morning. Besides, I saw you flick it. Now sit down again and tell me why you wanted to meet an old frump like me, and why you're talking this stage American. Sit down, do you hear, my good man, or I'll call a policeman."

That was Myrtle all over. Bossy.

I sat down. There wasn't anything else to do.

Well, the funny thing is, after that, Myrtle and I got along fine. You see, I really had a ranch in Arizona, so I didn't come out of that so bad. I'd bought it when times were good, and it had surely looked like a little gold mine then. I'd put in a guy to act as foreman and he had a bunch of boys to run it, and there was a tidy bunch of steers running there. But now times weren't so good. It hadn't been doing much more than pay the boys' wages, so that was about as much use to me as horn rims to a bustard; though I knew I'd be raking in the bucks from it again when times got better.

I explained all that to Myrtle, with pictures of me among the boys, wearing those woolly pants to prove it. She saw then she'd got me wrong, though I allowed I'd overdone the Arizona line of talk. After that we were as sweet as two hicks in a flivver.

Well, I pretty soon saw I'd struck it swell. When I began edging my questions into the conversation, there wasn't a one that didn't get answered right. Myrtle never suspected a thing. Maybe that dame wasn't so smart as she'd figured, after all. She poured it all out to me; how she'd got almost more dough than she knew how to spend, and how she hadn't a living relative to give two hoots what she did with it or who she left it to, and how she wasn't such a tough girl as she looked and had a heart under that square-cut jacket just oozy with longing for a strong guy's love. Boy, was it easy! And in return I spilled the innocent beans about the swell ranch I had, and the dough I had stuffed away in the banks back at home, and the helluva big shot I was in the old home town. She lapped it up like a tough baby laps bourbon.

That evening we met again at her hotel, and when I saw the suite she had, I knew for certain I'd found what I was looking for. Anyways, Myrtle sent down for a pint, and we had it in her private parlor. They don't have bourbon in England, but the stuff was good, and after we'd had a few slugs each I felt good, too. Pretty soon Myrtle sent down for another pint, and I'm telling you she'd drunk level with me on the first.

Well, to cut a good evening short, before I swayed out of that room Myrtle and I were engaged to be married. Yes, just like that. I always was a quick worker, and I will say for Myrtle she was pretty near as quick as me. I finished the second pint before I shut my eyes and kissed her, but

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it wasn't so bad, after all. And in any case, I was feeling pretty good just then, though I knew darned well I'd have to be sending out for bromo first thing the next morning.

So when a guy comes up to me as soon as I got outside Myrtle's parlor and looks like he wants to get fresh, I just slammed one into his stomach before I asked him what he wanted; but somehow he jerked his stomach to one side and my fist went past his hip, so he could grab my wrist.

"Now then, none o' that," he said, in his Limey accent. "I've been waiting for you, my lad."

"The hell you have," I said. "Come on outside, you son of a ——"

"It's you that's coming with me," he said. "I know all about you. You're coming along with me to the clink." That's what they call the big house over here. "Confidence trick, eh? You can't get away with that here."

"Well, what the hell are you?" I stalled. "A bull of some sort?"

"You bet I'm a bull," he said. "Now, then, are you coming quiet? Lucky Miss Frumm warned me. We know how to deal with your sort here."

Just then Myrtle herself appeared in the doorway. The guy still had me by the wrist.

"It's all right, Mr. Foster," she said. "I've decided not to charge him. I'm going to marry him instead. It'll be a worse punishment for him."

"Say, Myrtle," I said, "who is this guy, anyway?"

"Why, it's Mr. Foster, the hotel detective," Myrtle sniggered. "I told him all about meeting you this morning, and asked him to be on hand this evening, just in case. After all, a poor weak girl needs protection, doesn't she? And I haven't known you long. You might not have proposed marriage at all."

"Oh, that's his racket, is it?" said the bull, interested. "Well, miss, I'd better warn you that ——"

"Say, Myrtle," I interrupted him, "this is just a private bull, you mean?"

"That's right," said Myrtle.

"Not a real cop at all?"

"Not an official one, no."

"Well, isn't that just too bad for him?" I said, and slammed him one again. This time it connected, because the guy wasn't expecting it. "How d'ya like that, punk?" I said. "Because there's another one coming to you from just where that one came from." And I slammed at him again, at his chin this time.

But he dodged it that time, and I took a belt on the chin instead myself that shook me up. The guy knew how to fight, I could see that.

"Come inside if you're going to fight," Myrtle said, holding the door open. "We can soon move the furniture." I had to hand it to her; she didn't look like she'd had a drop to drink all evening.

Well, the guy and I went inside. We were pretty mad at each other, and before Myrtle had begun moving the furniture we took off our coats and started in. I felt like I must beat up this guy or get killed.

At first I thought he was going to

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have it all over me. I took another belt on the chin that knocked me over backwards. When I got up I was so crazy mad I began missing plenty. Then I slammed two into his face, right and left, and that didn't seem so bad. But I'd drunk so much I was off balance most of the time, and when I tried to close in with him he'd just stand back and let me have it. I began to think I was in for a swell lacing.

Once when he banged me on the side of the head and knocked the other side against the parlor wall, I heard Myrtle say:

"That's the stuff, Foster. Knock hell out of the matrimonial crook."

Well, I don't know why, but that made me madder than a trapped skunk. It sounded real raw. I just went in and I didn't care what he did to me; I couldn't pump 'em in fast enough. One of them landed on the point of his chin, and that was the finish.

While he was sleeping on the floor I turned to Myrtle.

"Did you tell that guy to lay for me?" I said.

You got to hand it to Myrtle. "I did," she said. "I saw through your little game when you were pumping me this morning. I knew you were going to have the impertinence to propose marriage, so I warned Mr. Foster."

"The hell you did," I said, and slugged her one for herself. She went down like a hippopotamus into a mud pool. I left them lying asleep across each other.

I went back to my hotel and lay down across the bed. I was tired, and my jaw was sore where the bull had clipped me. I thought of Myrtle, and felt sorer than my jaw.

I figured I was about finished in Folkestone. Myrtle would see the story got spread around, and so would the bull; and after that the town would be too hot. It seemed like I'd better take the first train on to somewheres else, if I was going to put my racket over before it got too late. But I felt sore. Myrtle had certainly seemed to fall for the dope that morning. Now I saw that when she was pretending to hand out all that information she was only razzing me along. I'd been the sucker right enough, and Myrtle had just played me for one. It makes a guy feel pretty sore when he's fancied he's tough and then finds he's fallen like a spent bullet for the first amachoor who tries to razz him.

When I woke up the next morning I didn't feel any better. My mouth was as dry as the Arizona desert, and my lips were all swollen up, like I was trying to whistle and couldn't.

I had a pint in the cupboard, and after a couple of slugs I began to feel better. They didn't have running water in that hotel like they do in the civilized countries, but there was some water in the pitcher and I rinsed my face and doused my head in it. Then I sent down to the clerk for the bromo, and by the time I'd mixed that up and drank it I began to feel that I might be able to do some thinking again if I didn't do it too hard. So I sat down on the bed and tried

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to figure out what I was going to do next, and where I could go. I thought maybe they could tell me downstairs what was the next swell seaside town in England after Folkestone.

I was just going to try to make it, when the bellhop came in to tell me there was a dame downstairs asking for me. Leastways, he said a "lady," but I guessed he meant a dame.

"Listen, sonny," I said, "I don't know any ladies here except one, and if it's her you can tell her to go fry herself. Is that the one?"

"That sounds like 'er, sir," said the bellhop.

"Then tell her," I said.

The bellhop reached for the door, but before he could get through, it was slung open like a bison had charged it. The bellhop got knocked into the wastepaper basket on the other side of the room. It was Myrtle, of course. She held the door open and gave one jerk with her thumb, and the bellhop beat it quicker than I've ever seen a bellhop move before.

Myrtle came and stood over me. I thought she'd come to slug me back for the belt I'd given her.

But she didn't slug me. "Eddie," she said, "I got you into a hell of a jam last night." Leastways that isn't exactly what she said, I suppose, but it's what she meant.

I didn't say anything.

"I got you into a jam, and you slugged me for it, and I've come round to congratulate you."

"You've come round to do what?" I said.

"To congratulate you. You're the first man that's ever slugged me, and I never thought any man would ever have the guts. Congratulations, Eddie. And I apologize for doubting you."

"For doing what?" I said. I was feeling a bit nuts. I couldn't figure out what Myrtle was driving at.

"For doubting you, my good man," she shouted. "Can't you understand English?"

"Not like the way you English talk it," I said.

"Well, tell me this. Did you mean what you said when you asked me to marry you last night, or were you too drunk to know what you were saying? That's a straight question, and I'd be obliged for a straight answer."

I stared at her. I'd thought at first I must be nuts; now I thought she must be.

She took off her hat and slung it onto a chair, and gave a sort of hitch with her elbows to her skirt. "Well?" she said.

"Sure I meant it," I said hastily, before she could clip me.

"Do you love me?" she asked, and made a sort of movement with her feet. Her Oxfords looked bigger than ever.

"Of course I love you, Myrtle," I said quickly. I thought she meant to let out at my shins any minute.

"Then it's all on again," she said. "I'm sorry I doubted you, Eddie. I sent a cable yesterday to ask about your ranch, and I've just had the answer. I thought you were a crook, and I find you're only a mutt, or

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whatever you call a dumbbell in your language. I think I'd better marry you before you do something sillier still. You're quite sure you didn't want to marry me for my money, Eddie?"

"Aw, hell! Forget it," I told her.

"Very well, I will. And you'd better forget all I told you yesterday morning. I thought you were a crook pumping me, so I stuffed you up with a lot of nonsense. I haven't got any money."

"Sure you haven't," I said. I'd seen the wise look she shot at me and knew she was just trying me out. "What the hell? I've got plenty for two."

"Good!" said Myrtle, kind of briskly. "Then stop looking as if you were trying to whistle and get up and kiss me, even if it hurts."

Well, I didn't care which of us was nuts. I got up and clinched with her. I know a break when I see it.

So that's how Myrtle and I got fixed up.

You can bet I didn't waste any time. Myrtle didn't seem to want to waste any either. She was a quick worker, too. I will say that for Myrtle. The cable had put her properly to rights, and she was sure now I was a swell rancher and couldn't be after her dough. So she put me wise about the special licenses and all those fool things you have to have over here when you want to get spliced in a hurry, and in three days Myrtle Frumm was Mrs. Eddie Tuffun.

And was she pleased? Well, it seemed like she was pretty near as pleased as me, and that's saying plenty. I lent her a couple of hundred bucks in advance of the contract to fix her trousseau and told her she needn't pay it back either, and that finished her. She knew I must be on the level to do that. I'd figured that was just how she would feel.

I didn't have to press her either. She was still pulling her stuff about being so darned poor you'd think she hardly knew where her next bucket of champagne was coming from.

"You shall never say I married you under false pretenses, Eddie," she'd say. "I know they attach a lot of importance to money in your country."

"That's all right, Myrtle," I'd tell her. "I've got plenty for two."

"You'll need it," she'd answer. "I've got extravagant tastes, like staying in first-class hotels; and I warn you that I'm going to gratify them."

"You'll gratify 'em, all right, baby," I'd say.

"I've told you before not to call me 'Baby,'" she'd snap out on me. "It sounds ridiculous." Then she'd go on to tell me about her house and gardens, and what alterations she was going to make with my dough.

I had a job not to smile. The way she talked you'd have thought it was a four-room bungalow, with a hired girl to do the work. Only she'd let out it was in London, and they don't have bungalows in London.

Anyways, it made one thing easy. On the morning we were spliced we went to see an attorney and made new wills. Only a couple of dozen

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words, leaving everything to each other.

Myrtle never stalled at the idea. "My dear man, of course," she said, when I kind of delicately suggested it. "You needn't beat about the bush. I should expect it in any case. As for my few sticks, you're welcome to them; but I'm certainly not going to lose that ranch of yours the first time you get in the way of a motorbus."

You'd think that after I'd got things all fixed the way I wanted them, I'd be feeling pretty good. But I don't know. Every time I had to kiss Myrtle, it seemed to get kind of harder. I tried good and plenty to do it as if I meant it, and it seemed like she couldn't tell the difference. I guess she couldn't too, at that. So I got away with it all right.

But I don't know. On the morning we were to get married, before we went to the attorney's, I began to wish I hadn't hit on the racket at all. I looked round my bedroom, with its narrow bed, and it didn't seem as if living with Myrtle was going to be worth all the dough in the world. I threw a couple of drinks into me and it wasn't so bad. I began feeling pretty high. I thought maybe I could get her dough into my own name, and then we could live apart.

Well, anyways, we got the wills signed and left them with the attorney for safe keeping. And then we got married. That was all there was to it. One minute we were married, the minute before we weren't.

When we came out of the marriage office we just looked at each other.

"What you say we have a drink, Myrtle?" I said.

"You look as if you needed one," said Myrtle.

We went back to her rooms and had a couple of slugs. That made me feel better, and I managed to kiss Myrtle kind of fierce, like they enjoy it.

I might have known Myrtle would be different. "Cut out the rough stuff, Eddie," she said. "You've socked me once, my lad, and that's going to last you for the rest of your life. If there's any more socking to be done, I'll do it."

Well, that made me feel a bit sore, so when Myrtle told me to get busy and help her pack her things I was all set for trouble.

"Pack your things hell," I said. "What do you want to pack your things for? We're staying right here."

"Nothing of the sort," she said. "We're going on our honeymoon."

"Honeymoon hell," I said. "We're staying right here. I've brought my grips, haven't I?"

Well, would you believe it but Myrtle just took no notice at all. She just went on packing.

"Take it easy, baby," I said. "Take it easy, can't you? What's the big idea?"

She looked up for a minute. "I told you. We're going on our honeymoon. We're going to Slocum-on-the-Marsh. I've written for rooms there. We're catching the three ten train. I've ordered the taxi. — Now, then, Eddie, put that bottle down. You've

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had quite enough to drink already, and you know you can't carry your liquor. I'm not going to arrive at Slocum with a drunken husband."

I threw the bottle at the fireplace, and it broke.

"And I'm not going to arrive at Slocum at all," I told her.

From the way Myrtle acted, you'd have said she hadn't even heard.

We went to Slocum.

There were twenty-seven people in Slocum while we were there, and twenty-six of them were dead. The twenty-seventh was Myrtle.

By the time our honeymoon was over there were twenty-eight dead, because I was dead three times over. Myrtle liked walking. There wasn't any need to walk, because there was nothing to see but more marsh after you'd walked there; but that didn't matter to Myrtle. And it wasn't any use to say I'd got a sore heel, because . . . oh, hell.

The only ten minutes I enjoyed out of our fortnight at Slocum was when a guy beat me up for making a pass at him. He looked like he weighed about thirty pounds more than me and it was all muscle. He pretty near banged my head off.

But Myrtle didn't like me fighting, and I'd figured out already that I'd got to do what she wanted for a while at any rate; and that stood for not doing what she didn't want.

The trouble was that doing what Myrtle wanted and not doing what she didn't want, seemed like there wasn't going to be room in my life for anything else. When I could give Myrtle the slip, I used to go and sit in the marsh and think about it. It looked like hell then, being ordered around by a fat dame for the rest of my life. I couldn't figure out where I'd slipped up, either. Maybe I hadn't had a break at all, or maybe the racket had been bad from the start.

Then I'd go back to the bar and have three-four drinks, and it didn't look so bad after all. I'd gone out after the dough, and I'd got it. That was the big idea. I saw then that I'd had a lucky break. It was just I didn't know how to handle it. I'd be able to fix Myrtle when I was ready. I just wasn't ready yet, that was all.

I didn't like to ask Myrtle much more about her mansion and grounds (they call a big house a mansion over here). She acted kind of queer sometimes when I did. I saw she'd got the economy bug like lots of these rich guys. You have to be awful rich before you begin to worry over spending a couple of dimes. I've seen rich guys that way before. So I just pretended to agree with Myrtle when she kept saying we must economize, and thought what I'd do with her dough once I'd got my hooks on it.

I thought a good bit about Myrtle's mansion, too. I betted it was swell. I betted she had a butler too. I even worried whether I'd have to say "Whiskey and soda" to him instead of "highball" every time I wanted a drink. By the day we were to leave Slocum and go to the mansion I was like a jazz drummer in a Harlem

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speakeasy on Thanksgiving Night.

Well, we got away from Slocum, and was I glad to see the end of that place? Myrtle told me to fix our bill, and I still had a good few bucks left to buy the tickets to London. I figured I'd better go on handing them out till we were safe in the mansion.

At London Myrtle gave the address to the taxi driver, and I followed her in so quick you might have thought I was afraid of being left behind.

"Ah," she said, leaning back, "this is nice, Eddie. It isn't often I drive home in a taxi."

"Sure," I said. "Taxis run you to a lot of dough."

"A really good hotel once a year, that's my only weakness," said Myrtle, sounding sort of pleased with herself. "You won't find me an extravagant wife, Eddie."

I gave her hand a squeeze. It was like squeezing a raw chop. "That's all right," I said. "Just you wait till we start hitting it up. Say, Myrtle, how far is it to this mansion of yours?"

"Oh, a fair ride. I hope you're not going to be disappointed in my little house, Eddie. It's hardly the sort of thing you've been used to."

I had to hide a smile. "Don't worry, Myrtle," I said. "I guess I can make it do. Somewheres near Oxford Street, did you say it was?" That was about the only swell street I knew in London.

"Oh, no. A long way," Myrtle said. "Now don't ask any more questions. Wait and you'll see."

Well, I did wait, and it seemed like I was waiting a long time. The taxi went on and on. Sometimes Myrtle told me the names of the districts we went through. "This is Fulham," she'd say. Or, "That's Putney Town Hall." I thought they must have their railway depots a long way from the swell parts in London, but it didn't look like the parts we kept driving through were getting any sweller.

At last we turned out of a long street into a little one where the houses were joined together in pairs instead of standing alone. The taxi stopped in front of one. It had about six feet of garden in front of it, and on the front gate was *Rapallo*. When the taxi drew up, the hired help came bouncing out on the steps. She didn't wear a nice black dress and a white cap with streamers, like you see in the movies. She wore a sort of pink overall.

"Ah, there's Kate," said Myrtle.

I looked at her. "Say, Myrtle," I said, "what are we stopping here for?"

"What do you think we're stopping here for, my dear man?" said Myrtle. "This is where I live."

Well, could you beat that?

Now, I want you to get this plain. I never figured at the beginning to bump Myrtle off. I never have believed in bumping guys off unless you've got to, or dames either for that matter.

But I hadn't been Myrtle's husband for a month before I began to see it was more than flesh and blood could stand. At that I might have stood it if

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we'd been living in a mansion and Myrtle had as much dough as I'd figured. But all she had was about two-three thousand bucks a year, and this one-horse little shack *Rapallo*. It certainly was a tough break.

As for Myrtle, you'd have thought she'd have been grateful to any guy that married her, with that dial of hers. But grateful hell! It seemed like she thought I ought to be down on my knees all the time being grateful to her for marrying me.

And bossy! Say, it was a wonder she let me breathe without her permission. It was "Eddie, do this," and "Eddie, I've told you you're not to do that," the whole time. And when I'd ask her who she thought she was ordering around, she'd say, "The meanest little skunk that ever came out of America, that's who."

The reason she called me mean was when she began to suspicion that maybe I hadn't got quite so much dough as I'd let on. I couldn't hide it, either. By the time we got to London I hadn't much more than a dozen bucks left. Of course, I kept telling her I was expecting a draft any minute from home, but she was so mean she just didn't believe me.

After that she was always shooting off her mouth about her income only being enough for herself and not being able to keep an able-bodied husband in idleness, till I pretty near slugged her once or twice. But I don't know. I'd slugged her once, and I kind of had the feeling that I'd better not try it again. No dame fights fair, and Myrtle always seemed like she might grab up the poker and sock me with that.

So by the end of the month I'd figured out that I'd have to bump her off. There just wasn't anything else to do.

Of course I knew I could walk out on her, but where would I walk to? Besides, I didn't see why I should have had all that trouble for nothing. Myrtle certainly owed me something, and that was the only way she was likely to pay it.

Still, it wasn't going to be so easy. They're liable to make quite a fuss here over the smallest case of assault if the guy kicks off afterwards; and when a guy croaks, they don't give any bail either. It's not like it is back at home where you can put half a dozen guys on the spot in one evening, and only get a smile from the bulls; or if they do pull you in, just for the look of the thing, your attorney only has to lodge a writ of *habeas corpus* to have you out again in ten minutes. No, they don't give a guy much of a break over here.

So I knew I'd got to be plenty careful; and when Myrtle wasn't at me to chop up some wood or carry the coals to the kitchen or water the geraniums in the backyard or any other of the fool jobs she was always thinking up for me, I'd do some quiet figuring.

The way it seemed to me was this: it's got to look like an accident.

If it could be done that way, and the bulls didn't get suspicious, there was no one else to worry about. I knew that was an important thing,

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because I read up the dope about some of the big cases they've had over here and it often looked like the guy was going to get away with it till some relative of the victim comes snooping around and asking awkward questions and then goes off and tells the bulls that things don't look too good.

When things don't happen like that, it's some fool little mistake the guy makes that puts the dicks wise to him. Maybe he contradicts himself, or can't prove his alibi as well as he figured, or loses the check for the trunk he's left at the depot containing the body of the guy he's bumped off.

Well, except for Kate, who's too dumb to notice if anyone stole a pound of frankfurters out of her hand while she was putting them in her mouth, there's no one to come snooping around after Myrtle; and I wasn't going to do the job at all if there was any chance of making a mistake.

That's why I figured it must look like an accident, so neither the bulls nor the reporters would ever suspicion a thing.

And another thing. It had to be an accident when I wasn't anywhere around. These accidents don't look so good when a guy and his wife go walking along the cliffs and the guy comes back without the wife.

And another thing too. It had to be an accident over something Myrtle had the habit of doing, so there'd be no questions why she happened to be doing such a thing for the first time and croaked over it. That went for taking a moonlight row one night down the river and getting drowned; Myrtle doesn't take moonlight rows. And I was being so careful I meant it to go even for being run over by a car on a lonely road. In fact, I thought up so many things it mustn't be, that it didn't seem like there was going to be much room left for anything it could be. But I was wrong. There was one thing.

The way I worked around to it was this. What was Myrtle in the habit of doing that might turn out dangerous?

It was queer the way I found the idea. Myrtle and I were talking over our lunch and all the time I was trying to think up a safe way of croaking her. Then she began giving me my orders for the afternoon.

"Oh, and you must find ten minutes to run down to the garage at the corner and get me a new tin of aviation petrol," she said. She meant gasoline, but she called it petrol; all these Limeys do. "And don't forget to take the empty tin with you. — Do you hear, Eddie?" she snapped.

I nodded. I guess I looked a bit glassy-eyed. Myrtle had just reminded me that every fortnight she washed her hair in petrol. I certainly felt grateful. That was going to mean curtains for her.

After that it was just a choice of ways. At first I tried to work out how I could make a lighted match drop in the basin. It would have to be when Myrtle was about halfway through fixing her hair, so she'd have her eyes shut and her head over the basin. I

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didn't feel too good about burning Myrtle up, but it couldn't be helped. Then I thought that if I could get the match to light at the right time, when there was plenty of vapor in the room, she wouldn't burn up. She'd blow up. It would be a whole lot easier for her. That made me feel not so bad.

The time would be when she finished soaking her hair and was ready to dry it. I'd seen Myrtle on the job, and I knew she kept the towel on a glass shelf above the basin. When she was ready for it she just groped up with her hand; of course, she kept her eyes shut. That made me wonder whether I couldn't put something under the towel which would light up when Myrtle pulled the towel away, but I couldn't get it. I could fix the towel all right, and get out of the house and down the road a piece before she was ready to use it, but I couldn't figure out how to make something light up that way and be sure there'd be no trace left when the dicks examined the room.

Then I thought, if Myrtle was going to blow up anyways, why not blow her up with something else and everyone would naturally think it was the gasoline?

I knew I was getting pretty near it; and so I was. The next minute I saw the whole thing.

I'd help Myrtle get started and pour the gasoline over her head for her. Then, when she'd got her eyes shut and wouldn't be opening 'em again, I'd lay a bottle with some fulminate of mercury on top of the towel and beat it. When Myrtle pulled the towel down, the bottle would drop on the floor. The bathroom floor is tiled. Drop an ounce of fulminate of mercury on it, and no one in that room is going to stand as much chance as a snowball in hell. Everyone would naturally think it was the gasoline; and if the plan went sour on me and Myrtle saw the bottle, she'd have no more idea about the little crystals inside it than a New York traffic cop has about the Einstein theory.

Well, I thought about that plan for days. I took it out for walks with me, combed its hair, and gave it all the beauty treatment I could think up; and the more I looked at it, the sweller it seemed.

The fulminate of mercury was easy. I'd made it a dozen times over in the States. You can't be a tough guy and work any kind of a racket without needing to know something about bombs and detonators. All I needed was some mercury, some nitric acid, and some spirits of wine; and I guessed I could buy those pretty well anywhere, and no questions asked. All I had to say was I'm an experimenter in chemistry.

That's my plan, and I'm going out right now to buy those chemicals. Myrtle's due to wash her hair again next Wednesday, and I've got to be ready for it. I've been taking a few dimes out of Myrtle's purse lately, and I've still got a buck or two of my own left over. It looks like I've got enough now for the mercury and fixings.

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And the reason I've written it all out this way is I find it easier to see if I've overlooked anything. I don't aim to make any mistake like the guys who got caught, and setting it all out on paper makes it good and clear. I've read through what I've written, and I can't see anything wrong. The bottle with the fulminate will be blown into a million pieces. I'm not sure whether the detonation will explode the petrol too, but I reckon there should be enough flame to set off the vapor. Maybe I'll put some sulphide of antimony and potassium chlorate in to make sure. Anyways, if that happens I guess the whole house may go up, and I aim to be well down the road when it does. I'd pass the word to Kate if I could, but I can't. She'll have to take her chance.

Well, two thousand bucks a year is going to be plenty nice. Maybe if I sell out it will be nicer still. But nicest of all will be to get clear of Myrtle and be my own boss again.

They say over here the bull only needs to tap you on the shoulder once. But over here they can't detain you as a material witness and then beat hell out of you till you come clean. Over here they've gotta prove it.

Yeah — I'll say they've gotta prove it!

From *The Daily Tribune*, Wednesday, September 29th, 193–.

"A shocking explosion occurred yesterday at a house in Beverley Road, East Sheen, completely wrecking the bathroom and the walls of the adjoining rooms. The occupant of the bathroom at the time was literally blown to bits. It is reported that . . ."

Postscript: I cannot refrain from adding a few words to the manuscript begun by my late husband, to satisfy my sense of artistic neatness, although I shall put the whole thing in the fire before the ink is dry.

My husband made a fatal mistake in not doing the same thing. It may have helped him to clarify his ideas by putting them down on paper, but he should have burned the results sooner. For naturally, when I noticed him engaged so prodigiously in an exercise so unusual to him as writing, my curiosity would not let me rest until I had found out what it was all about. I had already made the discovery that the key of a dispatch case of my own fitted his bureau, so while he was out — actually buying his nitric acid and things — I took the opportunity of examining these papers.

To say that they interested me is to put it mildly. I had come to the conclusion already that I had made a fool of myself by marrying the little rat; but all women are prone to do that at my age. But I must confess that I had no idea what a real rat he was. For a few minutes it was quite a shock to me.

So when I had finished reading, I locked the manuscript away again and went up to my bedroom to think. I suppose that during the next hour I thought harder than I have ever done

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in my life before. After all, I had something to think about: what was I going to do?

I was not concerned for my life, of course. I knew it was simple to escape the unpleasant end he had planned for me. I had only to take the manuscript to the police to insure that, and at the same time bring on him the punishment he deserved.

But that did not satisfy me. I wanted to turn the tables on him, and dole him out a more poetic justice than he was likely to receive from the law. Besides, there was that ranch of his. I have always wanted to live on a ranch, though I certainly saw no prospect of achieving it. If I merely handed the little skunk over to the police, I should never see that ranch. Whereas if it was Eddie who by a most unfortunate accident got blown up instead of me . . . Well, his will was genuine enough. I may have made a fool of myself in one direction, but I am not a complete fool. Anyhow, to cut a long story short I devised a very simple plan.

My husband made another mistake. He assumed that I knew nothing about chemistry. In these days of higher education for women it is never safe to assume ignorance on the part of a woman in any branch of science. As it happens, I had done chemistry at school and found it extremely interesting; so interesting that I had progressed a good deal further than the school curriculum allowed, and used to help the chemistry teacher in his own private experiments. I still had my old textbooks, in a trunk in the attic. I went up there and got them out.

The upshot was that when Eddie came back, very pleased with himself, I had my plan cut and dried. He went upstairs, and then came down to tea. Then I went upstairs.

It didn't take me two minutes to find the bottles. He had hidden them behind some clutter on the top of the bathroom cupboard. I poured out a little of the nitric acid, and a little of the spirits of wine; I only wanted a very little.

The rest of tea we talked, funnily enough, about the ranch.

Afterwards Eddie went upstairs and locked himself in the bathroom. He didn't know that I went up and locked myself in the attic, any more than he knew that while he was busy making his fulminate of mercury I was just as busy dissolving a bit of a George IV silver teaspoon in nitric acid to make fulminate of silver. I was sorry about the teaspoon, which was one of a set, but it was all in a good cause. A sixpence of course has too much alloy.

Well, I suppose it was a curious situation that evening. Eddie was planning to murder me, and I was planning to get in first and murder Eddie; and we were as charming to each other as two snakes in love.

The next day I didn't say anything about washing my hair. My silver fulminate wasn't ready, and I wanted to give Eddie's mercury every chance. Eddie didn't say a word either. But

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the day after that I saw that the little two-ounce bottle hidden behind the clutter on the top of the bathroom cupboard was full of the gray crystals, and knew that Eddie's experiment had been successful and everything was in order. I couldn't help wishing, though, that he had managed to blow himself up during the process instead.

However, he hadn't; so at lunch I said, quite casually, that I was going to wash my hair that afternoon and would Eddie see that there was plenty of aviation petrol in the can. Eddie nodded, as cool as a cucumber, and said he would. I was annoyed, seeing Eddie's calmness, to notice how my own heart was thumping.

I knew Eddie would make for the bathroom directly after lunch. And he did. As soon as I saw him begin to go upstairs I hurried along to the kitchen. I wasn't sure how much damage would be done, and I wanted to get Kate out of the house. I was so intent on that, that I quite forgot to take a last look at Eddie.

Now, what I had done was this. Fulminate of silver is a great deal more dangerous than fulminate of mercury. It goes off almost if you look at it. I hadn't dared to make more than a pinch of it, but I could rely on that exploding at the slightest jar. So behind the clutter I had arranged a little seesaw. The bottle of fulminate of mercury weighed down one end of the little strip of wood that I had used as a crosspiece, and cocked up on the other end, but hidden behind a big jar of bath salts, was the fulminate of silver, in a pillbox. As soon as Eddie took away the bottle, the pillbox, which was on its side with a match underneath to stop it rolling down the seesaw, would roll down the other way and drop on the tiled floor, where it would explode.

The explosion would make a sharp report, but of course so little of the stuff would do practically no damage. It was Eddie's own fulminate of mercury that was going to do the real job. And the way I had "figured it out," as Eddie would say, was this. Eddie would naturally be nervous. The loud pop by his feet, while he was still taking down his own bottle, would make him jump violently. The jump would occur before he had got his bottle much below the level of the top of the cupboard, because he would be handling it slowly and with caution. So before putting his bottle on the seesaw, I greased it gently all over with butter and fixed a piece of thin white cotton thread under the cork, pushing the latter home not too tightly.

The theory was this. Eddie, starting violently when my fulminate of silver went off, would have one hand still above the level of his head. The inevitable reflex action would be to jerk that arm down. The jerk would encounter the resistance of the cotton thread under the cork — nothing very much, but enough to pull the slippery bottle out of his hand; and at the same time the jerk would have been enough to dislodge the not-very-securely-fastened cork from its

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place and so not leave the bottle dangling in the air. The bottle would therefore fall onto the tiled floor — and that would be the end of Eddie.

Naturally, I did not work entirely on theory. In the attic there was a shelf at just about the height of the top of the bathroom cupboard. I experimented there until I had found just how far to push the cork in over the loop of thread to make everything happen as it should.

And it did happen. Even as I write I can feel the gratification of the theorist whose calculations work out exactly right. I suppose the designers of big guns feel much the same way, though their method of killing is more cumbersome than mine.

Kate apparently noticed nothing peculiar about my demeanor, for she has said nothing since and she would certainly have commented on the slightest deviation from the normal had she discerned it. Kate is very strong on premonitions and forebodings and all that kind of thing. In any case, when I told her to come out and let me show her the beans I wanted picked for dinner, as I should be busy and could not show her later, she came at once. We were actually among the beans when the explosion happened.

Well, that is that, and they have been scraping Eddie off the shattered walls ever since. (Poor Eddie! He wasn't so tough after all.)

And that, I submit, is the perfect murder. It is now past midnight; the police have gone; and not the slightest suspicion has been voiced that it might conceivably have been anything but an accident. The police have been remarkably active. They have traced Eddie's purchases of mercury, nitric acid, and the rest already. From that, and the nature of the explosion, they know that fulminate of mercury was the cause. They have my own information that he was amusing himself with some chemical experiments, though I do not know what. They have seen my horror at learning that he must have been making fulminate of mercury; and my suggestion that he did not tell me because he knew I should try to stop him owing to the danger, is a perfectly reasonable one. Nor have I attempted to hide the fact that I have some smattering of chemistry myself; I have even dug some dusty old textbooks out of a trunk in the attic to prove it. But there is no trace in the attic of any experiment there: though even if there were, any such experiments would, of course, have been put down to Eddie.

They have no suspicion. I cannot understand how they ever could have any suspicion. And if they did, there is not the tiniest trace of proof. I repeat, it has been the perfect murder.

Now I am going along to the kitchen to burn this manuscript in the furnace, as I said, before the ink is dry. And in a month or two I shall be sailing for Arizona. As poor old Eddie would have put it: "Oh, boy!"

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Is there anyone in the United States who does not recognize the name of Billy Rose? We doubt it — he is a fabulous figure. Speed-champion stenographer before he quit high school — one of the most successful song writers in the history of Tin Pan Alley (remember "Barney Google"?) — famous night-club owner (the Backstage Club, the Casino de Paree, and now, the Diamond Horseshoe) — one of the greatest showmen of our time (Crazy Quilt, Jumbo, the Aquacade, and remember Carmen Jones?) — and most recently, a newspaper columnist in the grand Runyon tradition.

Here is a little yarn that appeared in Billy Rose's "Pitching Horseshoes" column — and it's a ratiocinative "ringer"!

DETECTIVE STORY

by BILLY ROSE

A WEEK from tomorrow, New Yorkers will go to the polls to elect a Mayor, and one of the issues will be the efficiency, or lack of same, of the Police Department.

I, of course, don't want to get involved in this political rhubarb, but I can't go along with the talk-talk about the inefficiency of the average New York cop. In a thousand and one weeks on Broadway, I've gotten to know a lot of the badge-wearers and I can rattle off dozens of stories which prove that the phrase, "a bright policeman," is not necessarily a contradiction in terms.

As for instance. . . .

On Election night, 1947, I was standing at the corner of Broadway and Forty-sixth Street with a detective named Johnny Broderick, since retired. It was the "whiching hour" — the hour when everyone is wondering which movie to see or which saloon to get potted in.

As Broderick and I stood there casing the crowd, a couple came out of the Automat.

"How's for killing an hour in a newsreel first?" I heard the man say.

"I told Miriam we'd be early," said the girl.

"Early is when you get there."

"I promised Miriam we'd get there by 8:30. It's after 8 now."

"I suppose it ain't never been 8 before," said the man, sticking his palms out as if he were Jolson.

"Miriam's the best friend I got," said the girl, "and I ain't going to miss her birthday party for no newsreel."

"Don't make no mountains," said the man. "I said I'd go, didn't I? We can get there an hour late and still be in time to blow out the candles."

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"After those drinks you had at the Astor bar," said the girl, "I wouldn't go blowing any candles. The explosion'd break windows for miles."

"That wasn't milk of magnesia you was drinking," said the man. "For two cents I'd —"

Johnny Broderick stepped out of the crowd which had collected around the couple. "Beat it, Bud," he said to the man.

The man took a fast look at Johnny, heeled, and walked up Broadway. The girl hurried after him.

A bobbysoxer in the crowd laughed. "Guess she loves him after all," she said.

"Too bad I couldn't spot their hook man," said Broderick, "or I'd have run them in."

"Their *what* man?" I asked.

"Their hook man," said the detective. "Those two were pickpockets and their spiel was to hold the crowd while the hook man was going through their pockets. I tried to spot him, but I couldn't. Maybe *he* spotted *me* first."

"How did you know the couple were crooks?" I said.

"The crack about the guy having a couple of drinks gave them away," said Broderick. "It isn't 8:30 yet, and on Election night, in case you've forgotten, you can't buy a drink in New York until after 9 P.M."

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A new MERCURY PUBLICATION — in addition to ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE, FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION, and the volumes listed above — is DETECTIVE: THE MAGAZINE OF TRUE CRIME CASES. DETECTIVE represents a fresh and different approach to the true crime field. Look for it on your newsstand.

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We are indebted to Vincent Cornier, creator of Barnabas Hildreth, for the story by L. A. G. Strong which marks Mr. Strong's initial appearance in EQMM. Mr. Cornier sent us tear-sheets from "Windsor Magazine," where "A Meal at Pernotti's" was first published. Whenever one author recommends another author's work, you can almost bet on its quality, sight unseen . . . L. A. G. Strong is a famous English poet and novelist whose work has been very popular for the past twenty years, and whose voice is familiar to all radio devotees in Great Britain — Mr. Strong has been broadcasting since 1933. He is a member of the Irish Academy of Letters, and his chief recreations are music ("I am much dependent on music," he writes), walking in the country, swimming, and talking dialect (especially of Dublin and Devon).

In a letter to your Editors, Mr. Strong speaks modestly of his ability to write detective stories — "this kind of work is off my beat," he says, "and I don't shine at it." That is typical British understatement. "A Meal at Pernotti's" is both literate and ingenious — a combination that is always irresistible, and always hard to beat.

More of Mr. Strong's short stories, exploring entirely different aspects of the detective-crime genre, will appear in EQMM soon.

MEAL AT PERNOTTI'S

by L. A. G. STRONG

Mortimer Staines laid the letter on his knee, and stared unseeingly at his study wall. He felt as if someone had thrown a bucket of cold water over him, and all the chill of it had concentrated in the pit of his stomach. He stared, then shook himself. Nonsense, he tried to say. Nonsense. But the waves of dismay rose, colder and colder, washing away contentment and assurance. He glanced at the mantelpiece. Seven minutes to ten. His secretary would not come till the hour. Picking up the letter, he read it again.

Dear Staines,

It has come to my ears that one of the central incidents in your forthcoming novel resembles rather closely a certain happening at Elsworthy fifteen years ago.

I sincerely trust that I have been misinformed. As you must realize, any suggestion of that kind would not only be extremely damaging to

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me professionally, but might even more seriously affect Alec. He stands to inherit a considerable property from his mother's people, and anything which could appear to cast doubt on his parentage might have consequences of the utmost gravity. On his and Marcia's behalf, as well as on my own, I should be obliged to take immediate action, were there any truth in the report which I have heard.

I look forward to an early assurance from you that the book contains nothing of the kind: or, if it does (which, indeed, I can hardly believe), or if there is in it anything which bears even a colorable resemblance to the episode in question, that you will at once withdraw it.

I hope you are benefited in health by your trip to Madeira.

Yours sincerely,

THOMAS WESTOVER.

Very slowly, Staines folded the letter. What foul, what damnable luck! He remembered it all now. Even while he was writing, a twinge of uneasiness, almost of conscience, had warned him that he was sailing pretty near the wind. But the incident had, from the book's point of view, been irresistible. All those fifteen years it had lain dormant in his mind, and now, without any premeditation or planning on his part, it had fallen into its perfect, appointed place. So he wrote on, telling himself, to quiet those uneasy stirrings, that he could go over it and tone it down a bit in revision. Then, as soon as the book was done, had come his illness, and in the stress of it and the hurry of getting away to Madeira, the thing had slipped his memory. It had gone clean out of his head. He hadn't meant to do Westover any harm. True, he had never liked the fellow. A stubborn, contentious, opinionated sort of chap. But, in writing, he had not been guilty of any attempt to get back on him. His aim had been purely artistic.

What *had* he said, exactly? It couldn't be as near the facts as Westover was trying to make out. It was so hard to remember, once one's imagination had taken hold on a thing, what was fiction and what was not. That was a thing the general public would never believe. Westover would never believe it. He could see him, shaking his round, big head, stolidly unconvinced.

All the same, said something else in his mind, why *should* he believe you? He's only concerned with what you've written, not with why you've written it.

The door opened. Punctual to the minute, his secretary came in.

"Good morning, Mr. Staines."

"Good morning, Miss Severn." He hesitated. "Get me out the proof copy of *Benighted*, would you? I want to have a look at something."

"Certainly."

She went to the filing cabinet, and came back with an unbound copy.

"Will you want me now, or shall I get on with that article?"

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"No. I'll come in when I want you. Thank you so much."

As soon as she had gone, he turned up the chapter in question. Renewed waves of dismay rolled over him as he read. It was close — it was terribly close! Touch after touch; the very description of the housekeeper, even. Such little unnecessary things! How could he have been so careless, so criminally careless? A little manipulation, a little twisting. Even if the central incident were intractable, he could at least have so covered it up as to make it questionable, to give himself a case. Whereas now he had none. How could he pretend that he had not had the original incident in mind, with all those identical details accusing him from the pages?

And he hadn't *meant* any harm. That was the curse of it. That was what made it so unfair.

He looked at the letter again. Withdraw! It was all very well for the fool to say withdraw, and the book coming out next week. Withdraw the best thing he had ever done: withdraw, when for the first time success was opening in front of him! The "Book of the Month" choice here, the "Reader's Guild" choice in America — withdrawal would mean a dead loss of thousands of pounds. Worse than that. His illness, and the trip to Madeira, had left him with an overdraft of close to fifteen hundred. Was he going to forego his hard-earned success for a bullet-headed, stupid brute like Westover?

But what, then? As soon as the book was published, Westover would inevitably take action. All right: let him. It would be a long time before the case came up. With good counsel, one could delay the matter. Anyway, the advances on the book would have been paid. He'd be able to fight the case.

And *would* Westover bring an action? Would he proclaim the thing to the whole world, and make certain that Marcia's people would hear of it? He might not. It was worth chancing, anyhow.

At any rate, there was no doubt about the immediate task, which was to keep him quiet. Going over to his desk, Staines took up his pen, and wrote what he flattered himself was an exceedingly artful letter, containing a noncommital but not actually fraudulent *précis* of the incident, and assuring Westover of his friendship and good will. He had thought, at first, of mentioning his illness and the hurry of departure, but decided that it would not do. Westover would be sure to keep the letter, and he must not in any way admit that he was at fault.

A good thing Miss Severn had not seen Westover's letter! He congratulated himself once more on his invariable practice of opening his letters himself. He would not even let her post his reply. The less she knew about this correspondence, the better it would be.

There, he said, slipping his reply into the mail box: let's hope that will quiet him. And, his mind somewhat

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relieved, he went in to dictate the rest of his morning's correspondence.

The reply did not quiet Westover. Soon after Staines had started work on the following morning, the telephone bell rang, and Miss Severn came in.

"Mr. Westover would like to speak to you, Mr. Staines."

"*Westover?*" Staines said, in tones of feigned surprise, and went into the next room.

"Yes?"

"Staines? This is Westover speaking."

"Oh, hullo, Westover."

"Thanks for your letter."

"Oh, you got it all right. Good. Well — I hope you're satisfied."

"I'm afraid I'm not, quite. You see —"

"Not satisfied?"

"I'm sorry. The episode, as you relate it in your letter, seems harmless enough. But my informant was very — er — circumstantial. He mentioned details which I don't see how he could possibly have known, if he hadn't seen them somewhere. So I'd rather look at an actual copy, if you don't mind, and see for myself."

There was a short pause before Staines replied.

"But of course." He paused again. "Look here — are you doing anything this evening? Or tomorrow evening?"

"No." The voice at the other end sounded cautious. "No. I'm free this evening."

"Well, why not dine with me at Pernotti's? I'll bring a copy of the book, and we can talk the whole thing over at our leisure. So much more satisfactory, don't you think?"

"I'd like to very much." There was a perceptible thaw in Westover's voice. "Thanks. When shall we meet?"

"Seven thirty? Whoever's there first, go straight to the table?"

"Right you are. Thanks."

Staines smiled grimly as he put back the receiver. He had felt sure Pernotti's would do the trick. Westover was a glutton. He could not resist the offer of a free meal, especially at his favorite restaurant.

Two hours later Staines went out. His mind had set in a resolve which by now seemed virtuous. He was fighting, he told himself, for his wife and children, for his very existence as a writer. On the one hand stood the success for which he had worked and waited so long: big sales, receptions, dinners, lecture tours, film rights — the whole glittering array of the land of promise. On the other stood Westover, sullen, stupid, suspicious, his bullet head shaking in obstinate refusal to see reason. Once he read the book, Westover would not hesitate. He would have no compunction, no pity. Setting his jaw, Staines set out. He had a lot to do before the evening. Ten past twelve. He hesitated for a moment, wondering where to go first, then headed for Pernotti's.

Staines was already seated at the table reading the evening paper, when

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Westover, a few minutes later as was his wont, came plunging into the little restaurant and peered shortsightedly around. Staines half rose, and waved his hand. Westover still did not see. A waiter came forward to take his huge, shapeless mackintosh.

"Over there, Monsieur. Against the wall."

Westover raised his hand, and bent forward to let the mackintosh be pulled off, dropping a couple of books as he did so. The waiter apologized, stooped, and gave them back. Staines watched with a cold, detached amusement. His heart was beating faster than usual, but otherwise he felt no fear, merely an excitement, a pleasant tension of spirit.

If there was any awkwardness in the meeting, it was on Westover's side. Staines was smiling, cordial, but not over-cordial. He showed no sign of wishing to conciliate his guest. He found time, as he talked easily of nothing, to wonder at his own composure.

"Now. First of all — most important." He drew the menu towards him, and smiled almost affectionately. "I think I know beforehand what you will have. Potato soup? *Moules marinière?*"

He watched Westover as he spoke. The heavy face, over which its owner was suspiciously keeping guard, could not help brightening.

"*Moules*," he agreed. "That sounds good."

"*Moules marinière*, with a little Johannisberger Schloss of the right year. Yes. They have the right year. Then, say, a mushroom omelette. I think a mushroom omelette. After that, the real business of the evening, an *entrecôte minute*, with an appropriate Burgundy. After that, we can pick and choose."

Westover almost beamed. Staines, watching him, could exactly read his mind. He's trying to blarney me and get me in a good temper, Westover was thinking. More fool he. I'll have a good meal at his expense, anyway. And, as the last suspicious rigors left his face, as he visibly relaxed and expanded to enjoy his meal, Staines could read, in the small shortsighted eyes, a gleam of pity for himself, that he should suppose Tom Westover likely to be seduced by any dinner.

Staines ordered Westover's meal from a smiling head waiter, with a lighter one for himself. The soup was brought at once, and Westover, after peering around the table, seized the salt cellar and liberally shook it over his plate.

"Never use enough salt in the cooking," he observed. "No place does."

Staines smiled. "A matter of taste, surely? I hardly take it at all."

"Good for you," said Westover, between gulps. "Keeps you fit."

At the sight and scent of the mussels, his eyes gleamed. Salting them freely, he rubbed his hands together, and was so far softened as to inquire after Staines's visit to Madeira. It was not until halfway through the omelette that, warned by an increasing mellow glow within that he had bet-

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ter not delay, Westover awkwardly brought up the subject which had occasioned the meeting.

"Look here — this book," he mumbled. "Sorry to seem difficult, and all that. But there's such a lot hanging to it, I can't afford to run risks. Source I heard from was so very positive."

"What *was* the source?"

"Hardly fair to say."

"It narrows down pretty well, doesn't it? Not many people can have seen the book who know you, and fewer still who could have any knowledge of the Elsworthy days."

"'Fraid I can't tell you, all the same. It was a reliable source," he added, looking up and meeting Staines's eye for the first time.

"Even though guilty of a breach of professional confidence."

"Oh, I don't know. Still — that's not the question, and I'm afraid, in view of what I heard, that I must ask you to let me see a copy of the book. Not brought one with you, by any chance?"

"No. But there's one on the way to you. You'll get it tomorrow. I thought it would be better for you to read it at your leisure. Here, over the dinner table, you might find it awkward to say what you really feel."

Little you know me, thought Westover, but he grunted assent.

"You shall read it at home," Staines went on, "and consult Marcia about it, if you wish. Then just tell me what you want changed, and I'll do it, even if it holds the book up till the spring."

Like you, again thought Westover, to make a favor of what you know you'll have to do anyway; but once again he made an amiable sound, and the talk passed to neutral matters.

The Inspector came in, and set down a bundle of typed flimsies on the table. He nodded, in answer to the Superintendent's raised eyebrows.

"Yes," he said. "Buckets of it."

"I thought so. A good mark for that young doctor. A meal like that would be enough to kill anyone, by itself."

"You'd have thought so. But he always ate on that scale, apparently. When he got the chance, that is."

"They know him well at that place, then?"

"Yes."

"You've been there again?"

"Less than an hour ago. They can't tell me anything fresh. Pernotti himself, though —"

"What about him?"

"He was in a stew, naturally. But it looked to me as if he was keeping something back."

"There may have been something wrong with the stuff, anyhow. I mean, as well." The Superintendent grimaced. "Those shellfish —"

The Inspector shook his head decisively.

"No. Two other people had 'em, the same evening."

"That's not conclusive."

"But, now we know what it was, why do we bother about the mussels?"

"Only because you say Pernotti

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looked as if he was keeping something back."

"He may have found something wrong behind the scenes. Pots not cleaned properly, like that place in Claude Street. You remember."

"Still, that wouldn't account for—"

"Of course it wouldn't." The Superintendent pulled the flimsies towards him. "Well, the next thing is, who did it?"

"Staines."

"Why?"

"God knows. We'll find out, soon enough. He did it, all right."

"What's his connection with Westover?"

The Inspector jerked his thumb towards the flimsies. "Last sheet."

The Superintendent read it over.

"H'm. Same college at Cambridge. Westover — student in Germany. Three years in same village . . . contributions to *Viewpoint*—" He looked up. "Plenty of common ground. Any record of a row between them?"

"Nothing so far."

"Women?"

"Nothing to show. Knew each other's families, of course. But, as far as I can make out, they haven't seen much of each other these last few years."

"Makes a row less likely, doesn't it?" He looked down at the papers again. "Well, you'd better get on with it."

The Inspector rose. "I'll go to Staines's place again, and snoop around."

"How was he, when you tackled him?"

"All right. Concerned, shocked. Not too much. Not too little."

"How'd he strike you?"

"Nervy, but got a grip on himself."

"Speak up freely?"

"Yes. Just right. Anything he could do to help. *You* know."

"Well. We'll get him."

"We'll get him, all right."

Several hours went by before the Inspector visited his superior officer again. There was a look in his eye which the Superintendent noted at once.

"Any luck?"

"Yes. A definite link between the two men."

"Yes?"

"I tackled Staines's wife. She was away for two nights, including the night of the dinner. She didn't know anything about it. Then I tackled his secretary. She said that Westover had rung up that morning, and that Staines had taken the call himself."

"Did Westover say what he wanted?"

"No."

"Staines expect the call?"

"Apparently not. He said he wondered what Westover wanted."

"H'm." The two men looked at one another. "Well," the Superintendent went on. "That's all right, as far as it goes, only it doesn't go very far. Now *I've* something to tell *you*. A chap named Channing rang up, a

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reviewer, or publisher's reader, and said he had something he thought we ought to know. Said that he had warned Westover that Staines's new novel had something in it highly libelous to Westover and his wife."

The Inspector whistled. Then his face clouded again.

"That's no reason for killing a man — to stop him taking a libel action against you. Besides, the book isn't out yet. He'd have been able to withdraw it."

"I've had a few inquiries made. I saw Staines's publisher, among others, and his agent. It seems that he stands to make big money out of this new book. It's been chosen by some blooming society or other. Both here and in America. To withdraw it, or even hold it up, would have meant a very heavy loss."

"Aha. That looks better."

"*And* his account was close to fifteen hundred overdrawn."

"Great." The Inspector's eyes gleamed. "We've got him."

"We're on the way, certainly. The next thing is to find how he put all that arsenic into the poor devil's food."

"And where he got it."

"Exactly. And that isn't going to be so easy."

The next day found the police well satisfied with the progress of their case. True, they could not so far trace any purchase of arsenic at a chemist's shop, but a routine inquiry of that type always took time. If Staines *had* visited any chemist for the purpose, his visit would inevitably be discovered. Actually, the Superintendent felt little hope that he had. If the information volunteered by the man Channing was true, then Westover could only have approached Staines within the last few days, for the excellent reason that Staines was only just back from his voyage. The date was checked, too, by Channing's reading of the book. He could not have seen it before it was in proof. If, therefore, Staines had purchased arsenic, he must have done so within the last few days.

This question was dwarfed, however, by a discovery of real importance. Staines had an uncle, a doctor, living near Swiss Cottage. He was on terms of considerable intimacy with the old man, and often visited his house. He had, it was ascertained, gone up to see him on the afternoon of the day when Westover partook of his fatal meal. The doctor had been out, and Staines had elected to wait in his study. The old man did his own dispensing, and his dispensary was an adapted conservatory off the study. Staines had remained in the study for some twenty minutes, and then rung the bell and told the maid that he could wait no longer, and that, in any case, his visit was of no importance. If, therefore, the dispensary door had been unlocked, as it often was, Staines had ample opportunity of going in and abstracting anything.

The next step was to ascertain whether the old man missed any drug.

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It would not, of course, do to specify arsenic. A detective of plausible manner was sent with a made-up story about a burglar who had been breaking into dispensaries; but he could get nothing out of the old man who, having been scolded before for leaving his dispensary door unlocked, became testy and declared roundly that he missed nothing. In any case, the detective reported, he was vague and unbusinesslike, and it was in the highest degree improbable that he knew how much he had of any drug until he actually ran out of it.

There was no record of the dispensary's stock.

Still, the Superintendent reflected, they could prove opportunity. Motive and opportunity: that took them a good way. Moreover, study of the passage in *Benighted*, indicated by Channing, suggested further matter for investigation. The focus of attention here turned out to be, not Westover, but his wife. Marcia Teddington, as she then was, appeared to have been what the Inspector termed "a lively one." Her vagaries had caused her family much concern. Some time before she married Westover, her parents died, and a wealthy uncle undertook responsibility for her, but only on condition that she behave herself. Then, a couple of years after her marriage, while the Westovers were living at Elsworthy, she had had a brief infatuation for another man, since dead. Nothing definite was known, but it was to this incident that the passage in Staines's book seemed to refer. If this were so, it added considerably to the probability of his guilt.

The inquest on Westover brought the police their first set-back. The inquest itself went as well as they could wish. It was not till the next morning that the Inspector came in with a long face to the Superintendent's room.

"We're all wrong," he observed. "Staines's case gone up the spout."

"What d'you mean?"

"There've been some more people taken ill at Pernotti's."

"*At* Pernotti's?"

"Well, after eating there."

"When?"

"One on the same night, and four the next day."

"Did they complain?"

"Two of 'em did." The Inspector's face hardened. "I'll have the pants off Pernotti. He never told me."

"You said you thought he was keeping something back."

"Yes, the little —!"

"It's only natural," said the Superintendent. "Thought he might lose his business. You can hardly blame him."

"I suppose not."

"Anyway, as you say, that looks like letting out Staines."

The two men mused for a moment in silence. Then the Superintendent roused himself.

"Well, you'd better get down there, and find out what you can."

The Inspector was just turning to

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go when the telephone bell rang. The Superintendent picked it up. A look of surprise dawned on his face, and he signed the Inspector to remain. When the call was ended, he laid the receiver down, and stared at his subordinate.

"Well, I'm —!" he exclaimed.

"What is it?"

"Another of 'em. At Pernotti's."

The Inspector snorted. "I don't see it matters how many there are."

"This was last night."

"*Last night?*"

"Yes."

The Inspector stared comically. "Well," he said, "that lets out friend Staines, for good and all."

For Mortimer Staines, though unaware of the fact, had for more than forty-eight hours scarcely made a single movement unobserved, and the record of observation was such that not by the wildest stretch of imagination could he be held responsible for the illness of any of Mr. Pernotti's patrons on the night before.

The Inspector jammed on his hat.

"I'll go down," he said.

The interview with Pernotti was short and sharp. Having reduced the little man almost to a jelly, the Inspector once more demanded to see his staff. Changing his manner to one of the utmost affability and friendliness, he questioned them again one by one. This second visit naturally made the staff apprehensive. The chef especially was in a state of terror. With tears in his eyes, he assured the Inspector that he could not account for the sequence of illnesses. His kitchen was always scrupulously clean, he called Heaven to witness, and since the first case, he and his colleagues had redoubled their care and precautions.

From the restaurant, after taking charge of the bill carbons for every meal eaten on the days in question, the Inspector went off to interview the victims. The task took him all day, and he got nothing out of it. In every case the patrons were able to identify their bill and confirm its accuracy. Sitting ruefully over a late tea in a Lyons, and collating his results, the Inspector perceived that they led to exactly nothing. The victims had eaten a wide variety of dishes, with only one overlapping. Oh, well, he had better look into that; and with a tick against *Pollo bollito Lydia*, he got up, and went off to interview the last name on his list.

Mr. Ernest Brown was not at home. He was, his mother explained archly, spending the evening at the home of his fiancée. The Inspector, arriving there, found the happy couple in the parlor, and was duly presented to Miss Gladys Thatcher. He was, he immediately perceived, in luck, for Miss Thatcher had been with Mr. Brown on the night in question.

The Inspector smiled. "That's capital," he said, and pulled out the sheaf of bills. "Now, Mr. Brown, can you identify yours?"

The young man looked through the sheaf.

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"Yes," he exclaimed. "That's it."

The Inspector looked at it. His face went blank.

"Why," he exclaimed. "You both had the same."

Miss Thatcher looked down modestly. A self-conscious smirk appeared on the face of Mr. Brown. They exchanged glances. Miss Thatcher giggled.

"That's right," said Mr. Brown at last. "We thought it would be nicer."

The emotional aspects of the meal did not interest the Inspector.

"Yet," he cried, "one of you was taken ill, and the other wasn't!"

"That's right." Miss Thatcher lovingly pressed her fiancé's arm. "We thought it was queer at the time."

The Inspector shook his head. He happened to know that the results of Mr. Brown's indisposition, when analyzed, revealed the presence of arsenic.

"No," he said. "It's not possible. You *can't* both have eaten the same. There *must* have been something different. Think."

"But we didn't. There isn't anything."

"Not even a roll? Or did one of you drink water, and the other not?"

"Nothing." They looked at one another. "Except, of course," said Miss Thatcher, "the salt."

"The salt!"

"Yes. Ernest is a terror for salt. He always wants me to take it. He says it would be good for me. But I can't bear it." She smiled again. "It's the only thing we differ about," she said.

Pernotti's face turned yellow when he saw the Inspector once more enter the little restaurant. He rushed towards him, distraught, and clutched at the lapels of his coat.

"Sir, sir!" he cried. "It is not my fault. I am lost, I am ruined, I am at the end of my wits. I may as well close at once."

The Inspector disengaged himself.

"That's all right," he said shortly.

"When will it stop? When will it stop? My wife and me, it is killing us. Never has such a thing happened before. And now, yet another —"

"Another?"

"Yes. Did you not know? Yes. Another. After luncheon. Today."

He gazed imploringly at the Inspector, wringing his hands.

"Well," said the Inspector, "there won't be any more." He pushed his way further into the office. "I want all the waiters. At once, please."

"Arturo is not here. It is his day off."

"All the rest, then. No, stop! Wait a minute. Who does the tables? Lays them, and all that?"

Pernotti stared. "Why — each man does his own."

"All of them?"

"But yes."

"The cruet, and all that? Does each man fill his own?"

"Ah, the cruets! No. That is one man's job. Stanley — the Englishman. He does that."

"Let me see him, then. Quick."

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The little fat man hesitated.

"Sir, you don't suspect —?"

"Nothing. Hurry up."

A minute later Stanley, rubbing his hands on his apron, appeared, perplexed and uneasy.

"You fill the cruets, do you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Noticed anything odd about the salt lately?"

"The salt, sir? Can't say I have."

"Think. Right back to the first case of illness. The death. Did you notice anything, that first night?"

"No. I—" The man's eyes narrowed, then suddenly expanded. "Yes!" he exclaimed. "Yes. Now that you come to mention it."

He beckoned the Inspector out into the restaurant.

"See that table up there? Right up against the wall? Well, it's not a favorite, along of its being up against the gents' cloakroom, and getting a bit of a draft from under the door. We had so many complaints about it that the guv'nor give orders it wasn't to be laid, see? So we just put a cloth on it, same as you see now, and use it for standin' things on. Well, the night you mention, I remember, when I came to clear up, I saw a salt cellar standing on that table, all by itself. I was surprised, like, but didn't pay much heed. 'I wonder who put that there,' I said to myself. Then I picked it up, and put it with the rest."

"Was it full? Or nearly empty?"

"Ah, that I can't say, sir. I don't remember noticing."

"But you would notice, wouldn't you, since it's your job to fill them?"

"Not of an evening, sir. I do that the next morning."

"I see. Now, one point more. When you refill the salt cellars, do you throw out the old salt, and wash them out, or do you just put new salt in on top of the old?"

Stanley looked round uneasily, as if to make sure that his employer was not within earshot.

"I wash 'em out every now and then, sir, when they seem to want it. Or if the old salt gets damp, like. Otherwise —"

"You just pour in new salt on top of the old. Good."

"Beg pardon, sir?"

"Have you washed them out, since this trouble began? Go on, man. I won't say anything."

"Well. To tell you the truth, sir, I haven't."

"Right." The Inspector rose. "You might bring me the whole lot, will you? All the salt cellars."

"*All* of 'em, sir?"

"Yes."

"I hope, sir, I haven't done wrong?"

"That's all right. Get along."

Stanley was soon back, with a basket containing the salt cellars. Pernotti, his eyes round with astonishment, came in after him.

The Inspector cut short Pernotti's exclamations.

"How many ought there to be?"

Pernotti looked at his subordinate, as if he were accused of stealing one.

"Twenty-four."

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"Count 'em."

Three pairs of eyes simultaneously performed the operation.

"Twenty-five!"

"One extra!"

"Exactly." The Inspector permitted himself a grim smile. "You'll have to get a new set, Pernotti. For a few days, at any rate."

"As I figure it, it went like this."

The Inspector sat once more at the Superintendent's table. "Staines went to Pernotti's for lunch, and took a good look at the salt cellar. He then went off and bought one just like it."

"That should be easy to check."

"It's being checked now. He then trotted off up to his uncle's, pinched the arsenic, mixed it in with salt, and filled up his salt cellar. He got to the restaurant, pocketed the salt cellar on the table, and substituted his own. He ordered food he knew Westover would take salt with — I've ascertained from his wife that he took any amount of it, with practically everything — and watched the poor devil poison himself several times over.

"On his way to or from the cloakroom, he put down the harmless salt cellar on the nearest table, leaving the poisoned one where it was. Thus, if more cases of illness occurred, suspicion would be concentrated on the restaurant. Several milder cases did occur. Then Stanley refilled the salt cellar, covering up the poisoned salt with new; so that the next case of illness didn't occur till the new top layer of salt had been used."

"It's pretty good," said the Superintendent slowly. "But we've a good way to go yet before we get the rope round his neck."

The Superintendent was right. Iniquitous though it seems, they never did get the rope round the neck of Mortimer Staines. A purchase of salt cellars was traced on the very afternoon of the fatal meal. The buyer, who represented himself as acting for a restaurant, purchased three dozen. He wore glasses, the girl who had made the sale declared, and spoke with a foreign accent. She was unable to identify Staines as the purchaser. A number of salt cellars identical in design with the poisoned one were found in a furze bush on Roehampton Common, but no evidence was forthcoming as to how they came there. An able counsel emphasized the holes in the case for the prosecution, and Staines was acquitted.

Meanwhile *Benighted* had appeared, with a considerable success which the publicity of the trial augmented, though, it was observed with interest in the publishing trade, less than might have been expected. In any case, Staines was done for. His acquittal was no more than the equivalent of the Scottish "Not proven." Everyone believed him guilty.

And by throwing himself off a cliff just west of Sidmouth a few months later, he confirmed them in their belief that, although indirectly, justice had been done.

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The report of my death was an exaggeration.

— MARK TWAIN

In the October 1927 issue of "The American Mercury," one of George Jean Nathan's "Clinical Notes" was headed "The Decline of the Detective Story." With his usual acerbity, Mr. Nathan observed that "the good old detective story of the past appears to have fallen on evil days. What is more, it seems to have vanished from the scene entirely. What pass today for detective stories are such only in name; gone from them are the old open-and-shut integrity, the old straightforwardness, the old honesty. The stories we get nowadays are less detective yarns than tournaments in psychology, electrical engineering, parlor legerdemain, pharmacopeia, jitney science and epigram . . . In place of the old Lecoqs and Sherlocks and Lupins, we now have a troupe of priests, inventors, spirit mediums, sagacious butlers, laboratory professors, chemical experts, clairvoyants, psychoanalysts and God knows what else . . ."

We have mixed feelings about Mr. Nathan's comments of more than twenty years ago. There is no denying that he has at least one point on his side: the tendency toward sleuth-specialization has persisted; and while Mr. Nathan has every critical right to deplore this revolt from purism, we wonder seriously if the more specialized concept of a detective character has not done more good than harm . . .

Mr. Nathan went on to say that "the detective of the present fiction is a student of Freud, a gynecologist, a lawyer, a bacteriologist, an entomologist, a professor of calculus or a dilettante behaviorist." Well, what does it really matter, so long as they are also human beings and so long as they unravel the troubles of other human beings? And is it really true that we have no new Lecoqs, no new Sherlocks? After Mr. Nathan wrote his pessimistic words on the decline and fall of the roman policier, the world witnessed the births of J. G. Reeder, Sir Henry Merrivale, Dr. Gideon Fell, Asey Mayo, Sam Spade, Nick Charles, Nero Wolfe, Inspector Maigret, Professor Poggioli, O'Malley — and so many others! And are none of these upstarts genuine detectives? Are none in the straightforward, honest tradition of the past, despite their newfangled vocations and avocations of the present? No, the more we think of Mr. Nathan's gloomy

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appraisal and gloomier prediction, the more we are inclined to disagree with him on the basic truth.

There is still another point at issue. We are firm believers in freedom of technique, in gumshoe growth and detectival development. We stand foursquare for the breaking of shackles, for the literary divorce from all the formulas of the past. In other words, we maintain that no one — especially critics — should discourage, discredit, disparage, or disqualify the continuing change in the character of criminologists. Let them emerge from this constantly changing world of ours as an integral part of modernity — let them, irrespective of the fate of other fictional figures, grow up!

Besides, like the report of Mark Twain's death, Mr. Nathan's premature obituary was an exaggeration. Back in 1927, the good old detective story had not vanished from the scene entirely. There were detectives in 1927 who still performed in the straightforward tradition of the old Lecoqs and Sherlocks. Not every fictional sleuth of 1927 was a laboratory professor, entomologist, behaviorist, or even a God-knows-what-else.

For example, take Dashiell Hammett's Continental Op. In 1927 that fat, fortyish, fearless ferret was just about at the height of his career. The Continental Op never gave a fig for fancy stuff; he was a hard-thinking, hard-hitting homicide-hunter — exactly the kind of detective Mr. Nathan considered a Vanishing American. Why didn't Mr. Nathan know about The Continental Op? Probably because Mr. Nathan confined his reading of detective stories exclusively to books. In those days The Continental Op operated mostly in the pages of "Black Mask"— and even today there are die-hard "critics" who still look with disdain on any reading matter printed on magazine paper.

As Blackstone almost said in his COMMENTARIES *(Book IV, page 249): "The detective never dies."*

THE BLACK HAT THAT WASN'T THERE

by DASHIELL HAMMETT

NOW LISTEN, Mr. Zumwalt, you're holding out on me; and it won't do! If I'm going to work on this case, I've got to have the whole story."

He looked thoughtfully at me for a moment through screwed-up blue eyes. Then he got up and went to the door of the outer office, opening it.

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Past him I could see the bookkeeper and the stenographer sitting at their desks. Zumwalt closed the door and returned to his desk, leaning across it to speak in a husky undertone.

"You are right, I suppose. But what I am going to tell you must be held in the strictest confidence."

I nodded, and he went on:

"About two months ago one of our clients, Stanley Gorham, turned $100,000 worth of bonds over to us. He had to go to the Orient on business, and he had an idea that the bonds might go over par during his absence; so he left them with us to be sold if they did. Yesterday I had occasion to go to the safe-deposit box where the bonds had been put — in the Golden Gate Trust Company's vault — and they were gone!"

"Anybody except you and your partner have access to the box?"

"No."

"When did you see the bonds last?"

"They were in the box the Saturday before Dan left. And one of the men on duty in the vault told me that Dan was there the following Monday."

"All right! Now let me see if I've got it all straight. Your partner, Daniel Rathbone, was supposed to leave for New York on the twenty-seventh of last month, Monday, to meet an R. W. DePuy. But Rathbone came into the office that day with his baggage, and said that important personal affairs made it necessary for him to postpone his departure, that he had to be in San Francisco the following morning. But he didn't tell you what that personal business was.

"You and he had some words over the delay, as you thought it important that he keep the New York engagement on time. You weren't on the best of terms, having quarreled a couple of days before over a shady deal Rathbone had put over. And so you —"

"Don't misunderstand me," Zumwalt interrupted. "Dan had done nothing dishonest. It was simply that he had engineered several transactions that — well, I thought he had sacrificed ethics to profits."

"I see. Anyhow, starting with your argument over his not leaving for New York that day, you and he wound up by dragging in all your other differences, and practically decided to dissolve partnership as soon as it could be done. The argument was concluded in your house out on Fourteenth Avenue; and, as it was rather late by then and he had checked out of his hotel before he had changed his mind about going to New York, he stayed there with you that night."

"That's right," Zumwalt explained. "I have been living at a hotel since Mrs. Zumwalt has been away, but Dan and I went out to the house because it gave us the utmost privacy for our talk; and when we finished it was so late that we remained there."

"Then the next morning you and Rathbone came down to the office and —"

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"No," he corrected me. "That is, we didn't come down here together. I came here while Dan went to transact whatever it was that had held him in town. He came into the office a little after noon, and said he was going East on the evening train. He sent Quimby, the bookkeeper, down to get his reservations and to check his baggage, which he had left in the office here overnight. Then Dan and I went to lunch together, came back to the office for a few minutes — he had some mail to sign — and then he left."

"I see. After that, you didn't hear from or of him until about ten days later, when DePuy wired to find out why Rathbone hadn't been to see him?"

"That's right. As soon as I got DePuy's wire, I sent one to Dan's brother in Chicago, thinking perhaps Dan had stopped over with him; but Tom wired back that he hadn't seen his brother. Since then I've had two more wires from DePuy. I was sore with Dan for keeping DePuy waiting, but still I didn't worry too much.

"Dan isn't a very reliable person, and if he suddenly took a notion to stop off somewhere between here and New York for a few days, he'd do it. But yesterday, when I found that the bonds were gone from the safe-deposit box and learned that Dan had been to the box the day before he left, I decided that I'd have to do something. But I don't want the police brought into it if it can be avoided.

"I feel sure that if I can find Dan and talk to him, we can straighten the mess out somehow without scandal. We had our differences, but I like him too well, for all his occasional wildness, to want to see him in jail. So I want him found with as much speed and as little noise as possible."

"Has he got a car?"

"Not now. He had one but he sold it five or six months ago."

"Where'd he bank? I mean his personal account?"

"At the Golden Gate Trust Company."

"Got any photos of him?"

"Yes."

He brought out two from a desk drawer — one full-face, and the other a three-quarter view. They showed a man in the middle of his life, with shrewd eyes set close together in a hatchet face, under dark, thin hair. But the face was rather pleasant for all its craftiness.

"How about his relatives, friends, and so on — particularly his feminine friends?"

"His only relative is the brother in Chicago. As to his friends: he probably has as many as any man in San Francisco. He was a wonderful mixer.

"Recently he has been on very good terms with a Mrs. Earnshaw, the wife of a real-estate agent. She lives on Pacific Street, I think. I don't know just how intimate they were, but he used to call her up on the phone frequently, and she called him here nearly every day. Then there is a girl named Eva Duthie, a cabaret entertainer, who lives in the 1100 block of

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Bush Street. There were probably others, too, but I know of only those two."

"Have you looked through his stuff here?"

"Yes, but perhaps you'd like to look for yourself."

He led me into Rathbone's private office: a small box of a room, just large enough for a desk, a filing cabinet, and two chairs, with doors leading into the corridor, the outer office, and Zumwalt's.

"While I'm looking around you might get me a list of the serial numbers of the missing bonds," I said. "They probably won't help us right away, but we can get the Treasury Department to let us know when the coupons come in, and from where."

I didn't expect to find anything in Rathbone's office, and I didn't.

Before I left, I questioned the stenographer and the bookkeeper. They already knew that Rathbone was missing, but they didn't know that the bonds were gone too.

The girl — Mildred Narbett was her name — said that Rathbone had dictated a couple of letters to her on the twenty-eighth — the day he left for New York — both of which had to do with the partners' business; and told her to send Quimby to check his baggage and make his reservations. When she returned from lunch she had typed the two letters and taken them in for him to sign, catching him just as he was about to leave.

John Quimby, the bookkeeper, described the baggage he had checked: two large pigskin bags and a cordovan Gladstone bag. Having a bookkeeper's mind, he had remembered the number of the berth he had secured for Rathbone on the evening train — lower 4, car 8. Quimby had returned with the checks and tickets while the partners were out at luncheon, and had put them on Rathbone's desk.

At Rathbone's hotel I was told that he had left on the morning of the twenty-seventh, giving up his room, but leaving his two trunks there, as he intended living there after his return from New York, in three or four weeks. The hotel people could tell me little worth listening to, except that he had left in a taxicab.

At the taxi stand outside I found the driver who had carried Rathbone.

"Rathbone? Sure, I know him!" he told me around a limp cigarette. "Yeah, I guess it was about that date that I took him down to the Golden Gate Trust Company. He had a coupla big yellow bags and a little brown one. He busted into the bank, carrying the little one, and right out again, looking like somebody had kicked him on his corns. Had me take him to the Phelps Building" — the offices of Rathbone & Zumwalt were in that building — "and didn't give me a jit over my fare!"

At the Golden Gate Trust Company I had to plead and talk a lot, but they finally gave me what I wanted — Rathbone had drawn out his account, a little less than $5,000, on the twenty-fifth of the month, the Saturday before he left town.

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From the trust company I went down to the Ferry Building baggage-rooms and cigared myself into a look at the records for the twenty-eighth. Only one lot of three bags had been checked to New York that day.

I telegraphed the numbers and Rathbone's description to the Agency's New York office, instructing them to find the bags and, through them, find him.

Up in the Pullman Company's offices I was told that car "8" was a through car, and that they could let me know within a couple of hours whether Rathbone had occupied his berth all the way to New York.

On my way up to the 1100 block of Bush Street I left one of Rathbone's photographs with a photographer, with a rush order for a dozen copies.

I found Eva Duthie's apartment after about five minutes of searching vestibule directories, and got her out of bed. She was an undersized blonde girl of somewhere between nineteen and twenty-nine, depending upon whether you judged by her eyes or by the rest of her face.

"I haven't seen or heard from Mr. Rathbone for nearly a month," she said. "I called him up at his hotel the other night — had a party I wanted to ring him in on — but they told me that he was out of town and wouldn't be back for a week or two."

Then, in answer to another question:

"Yes, we were pretty good friends, but not especially thick. You know what I mean: we had a lot of fun together but neither of us meant anything to the other outside of that. Dan is a good sport — and so am I."

Mrs. Earnshaw wasn't so frank. But she had a husband, and that makes a difference. She was a tall, slender woman, as dark as a gypsy, with a haughty air and a nervous trick of chewing her lower lip.

We sat in a stiffly furnished room and she stalled me for about fifteen minutes, until I came out flat-footed with her.

"It's like this, Mrs. Earnshaw," I told her. "Mr. Rathbone has disappeared, and we are going to find him. You're not helping me and you're not helping yourself. I came here to get what you know about him.

"I could have gone around asking a lot of questions among your friends; and if you don't tell me what I want to know, that's what I'll have to do. And, while I'll be as careful as possible, still there's bound to be some curiosity aroused, some wild guesses, and some talk. I'm giving you a chance to avoid all that. It's up to you."

"You are assuming," she said coldly, "that I have something to hide."

"I'm not assuming anything. I'm hunting for information about Daniel Rathbone."

She bit her lip on that for a while, and then the story came out bit by bit, with a lot in it that wasn't any too true, but straight enough in the long run. Stripped of the stuff that wouldn't hold water, it went like this:

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She and Rathbone had planned to run away together. She had left San Francisco on the twenty-sixth, going directly to New Orleans. He was to leave the next day, apparently for New York, but he was to change trains somewhere in the Middle West and meet her in New Orleans. From there they were to go by boat to Central America.

She pretended ignorance of his designs upon the bonds. Maybe she hadn't known. Anyhow, she had carried out her part of the plan, but Rathbone had failed to show up in New Orleans. She hadn't shown much care in covering her trail, and private detectives employed by her husband had soon found her. Her husband had arrived in New Orleans and, apparently not knowing that there was another man in the deal, had persuaded her to return home.

She wasn't a woman to take kindly to the jilting Rathbone had handed her, so she hadn't tried to get in touch with him, or to learn what had kept him from joining her.

Her story rang true enough, but just to play safe, I put out a few feelers in the neighborhood, and what I learned seemed to verify what she had told me. I gathered that few of the neighbors had made guesses that weren't a million miles away from the facts.

I got the Pullman Company on the telephone and was told that lower 4, car 8, leaving for New York on the twenty-eighth, hadn't been occupied at all.

Zumwalt was dressing for dinner when I went up to his room at the hotel where he was staying.

I told him all that I had learned that day, and what I thought of it.

"Everything makes sense up until Rathbone left the Golden Gate Trust Company vault on the twenty-seventh, and after that nothing does! He had planned to grab the bonds and elope with this Mrs. Earnshaw, and he had already drawn out of the bank all his own money. That's all orderly. But why should he have gone back to the office? Why should he have stayed in town that night? What was the important business that held him? Why should he have ditched Mrs. Earnshaw? Why didn't he use his reservations at least part of the way across the county, as he had planned? False trail, maybe, but a rotten one! There's nothing to do, Mr. Zumwalt, but to call in the police and the newspapers, and see what publicity and a nation-wide search will do for us."

"But that means jail for Dan, with no chance to straighten the matter out quietly!" he protested.

"It does, but it can't be helped. And remember, you've got to protect yourself. You're his partner, and, while not criminally responsible, you are financially responsible for his actions. You've got to put yourself in the clear."

He nodded reluctant agreement and I grabbed the telephone.

For two hours I was busy giving all the dope we had to the police, and as much as we wanted published to the

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newspapers, who luckily had photographs of Rathbone, taken a year before when he had been named as co-respondent in a divorce suit.

I sent off three telegrams. One to New York, asking that Rathbone's baggage be opened as soon as the necessary authority could be secured. (If he hadn't gone to New York the baggage should be waiting at the station.) One to Chicago, asking that Rathbone's brother be interviewed and then shadowed for a few days. And one to New Orleans, to have the city searched for him. Then I headed for home and bed.

News was scarce, and the papers the next day had Rathbone spread out all over the front pages, with photographs and descriptions and wild guesses and wilder clues that had materialized somehow within the short space between the time the newspapers got the story and the time they went to press.

I spent the morning preparing circulars and plans for having the country covered, and arranging to have steamship records searched.

Just before noon a telegram came from New York, itemizing the things found in Rathbone's baggage. The contents of the two large bags didn't mean anything. They might have been packed for use or for a stall. But the things in the Gladstone bag, which had been found unlocked, were puzzling.

Here's the list:

Two suits silk pajamas, 4 silk shirts, 8 linen collars, 4 suits underwear, 6 neckties, 6 pairs sox, 18 handkerchiefs, 1 pair military brushes, 1 comb, 1 safety razor, 1 tube shaving cream, 1 shaving brush, 1 tooth brush, 1 tube tooth paste, 1 can talcum powder, 1 bottle hair tonic, 1 cigar case holding 12 cigars, 1 .32 Colt's revolver, 1 map of Honduras, 1 Spanish-English dictionary, 2 books postage stamps, 1 pint Scotch whiskey, and 1 manicure set.

Zumwalt, his bookkeeper, and his stenographer were watching two men from headquarters search Rathbone's office when I arrived there. After I showed them the telegram the detectives went back to their examination.

"What's the significance of that list?" Zumwalt asked.

"It shows that there's no sense to this thing the way it now stands," I said. "That Gladstone bag was packed to be carried. Checking it was all wrong — it wasn't even locked. And nobody ever checks Gladstone bags filled with toilet articles — so checking it for a stall would have been the bunk! Maybe he checked it as an afterthought — to get rid of it when he found he wasn't going to need it. But what could have made it unnecessary to him? Don't forget that it's apparently the same bag that he carried into the Golden Gate Trust Company vault when he went for the bonds. Blast it if I can dope it out!"

"Here's something else for you to dope out," one of the city detectives said, getting up from his examination of the desk and holding out a sheet of paper. "I found it behind one of the drawers, where it had slipped down."

It was a letter, written with blue ink in a firm, angular, and unmis-

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takably feminine hand on heavy white notepaper.

Dear Dannyboy:

If it isn't too late, I've changed my mind about going. If you can wait another day, until Tuesday, I'll go. Call me up as soon as you get this, and if you still want me I'll pick you up in the roadster at the Shattuck Avenue Station on Tuesday afternoon.

More than ever yours,

"Boots"

It was dated the twenty-sixth — the Sunday before Rathbone had disappeared.

"That's the thing that made him lay over another day, and made him change his plans," one of the police detectives said. "I guess we better run over to Berkeley and see what we can find at the Shattuck Avenue Station."

"Mr. Zumwalt," I said, when he and I were alone in his office, "how about this stenog of yours?"

He bounced up from his chair and his face turned red.

"What about her?"

"Is she — How friendly was she with Rathbone?"

"Miss Narbett," he said heavily, deliberately, as if to be sure that I caught every syllable, "is to be married to me as soon as my wife gets her divorce. That is why I canceled the order to sell my house. Now, would you mind telling me just why you asked?"

"Just a random guess!" I lied, trying to soothe him. "I don't want to overlook any bets. But now that's out of the way."

"It is," he was still talking deliberately, "and it seems to me that most of your guesses have been random ones. If you will have your office send me a bill for your services to date, I think I can dispense with your help."

"Just as you say. But you'll have to pay for a full day today; so, if you don't mind, I'll keep on working at it until night."

"Very well! But I am busy, and you needn't bother about coming in with any reports."

"All right," I said, and bowed myself out of the office, but not out of the job.

That letter from "Boots" had *not* been in the desk when I searched it. I had taken every drawer out and even tilted the desk to look under it. The letter was a plant!

And then again: maybe Zumwalt had given mé the air because he was dissatisfied with the work I had done and peeved at my question about the girl — and maybe not.

Suppose (I thought, walking up Market Street, bumping shoulders and stepping on people's feet) the two partners were in this thing together. One of them would have to be the goat, and that part had fallen to Rathbone. Zumwalt's manner and actions since his partner's disappearance fit that theory well enough.

Employing a private detective before calling in the police was a good play. In the first place, it gave him the appearance of innocence. Then the private dick would tell him every-

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thing he learned, every step he took, giving Zumwalt an opportunity to correct any mistakes or oversights in the partners' plans before the police came into it; and if the private detective got on dangerous ground he could be called off.

And suppose Rathbone was found in some city where he was unknown — and that would be where he'd go. Zumwalt would volunteer to go forward to identify him. He would look at him and say, "No, that's not him." Rathbone would be turned loose, and that would be the end of that trail.

This theory left the sudden change in Rathbone's plans unaccounted for; but it made his return to the office on the afternoon of the twenty-seventh more plausible. He had come back to confer with his partner over that unknown necessity for the change, and they had decided to leave Mrs. Earnshaw out of it. Then they had gone out to Zumwalt's house. For what? And why had Zumwalt decided not to sell the house? And why had he taken the trouble to give me an explanation? Could they have cached the bonds there?

A look at the house wouldn't be a bad idea.

I telephoned Bennett, at the Oakland Police Department.

"Do me a favor, Frank? Call Zumwalt on the phone. Tell him you've picked up a man who answers Rathbone's description to a T; and ask him to come over and take a look at him. When he gets there, stall him as long as you can — pretending that the man is being fingerprinted and measured, or something like that — and then tell him that you've found that the man isn't Rathbone, and that you are sorry to have brought him over there, and so on. If you only hold him for half or three-quarters of an hour it'll be enough — it'll take him more than half an hour traveling each way. . . . Thanks!"

I stopped in at the office, stuck a flashlight in my pocket, and headed for Fourteenth Avenue.

Zumwalt's house was a two-story, semi-detached one; and the lock on the front door held me up about four minutes. A burglar would have gone through it without checking his stride. This breaking into the house wasn't exactly according to the rules, but on the other hand, I was legally Zumwalt's agent until I discontinued work that night — so this crashing-in couldn't be considered illegal.

I started at the top floor and worked down. Bureaus, dressers, tables, desks, chairs, walls, woodwork, pictures, carpets, plumbing — I looked at everything that was thick enough to hold paper. I didn't take things apart, but it's surprising how speedily and how thoroughly you can go through a house when you're in training.

I found nothing in the house itself, so I went down into the cellar.

It was a large cellar and divided in two. The front part was paved with cement, and held a full coal-bin, some furniture, some canned goods, and a lot of odds and ends of housekeeping

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accessories. The rear division, behind a plaster partition where the steps ran down from the kitchen, was without windows, and illuminated only by one swinging electric light, which I turned on.

A pile of lumber filled half the space; on the other side barrels and boxes were piled up to the ceiling; two sacks of cement lay beside them, and in another corner was a tangle of broken furniture. The floor was of hard dirt.

I turned to the lumber pile first. I wasn't in love with the job ahead of me — moving the pile away and then back again. But I needn't have worried.

A board rattled behind me, and I wheeled to see Zumwalt rising from behind a barrel and scowling at me over a black automatic pistol.

"Put your hands up," he said.

I put them up. I didn't have a pistol with me, not being in the habit of carrying one except when I thought I was going to need it; but it would have been all the same if I had had a pocket full of them. I don't mind taking chances, but there's no chance when you're looking into the muzzle of a gun that a determined man is holding on you.

So I put my hands up. And one of them brushed against the swinging light globe. I drove my knuckles into it. As the cellar went black, I threw myself backward and to one side. Zumwalt's gun streaked fire.

Nothing happened for a while. I found that I had fallen across the doorway that gave to the stairs and the front cellar. I figured that I couldn't move without making a noise that would draw lead; so I lay still.

Then began a game that made up in tenseness what it lacked in action.

The part of the cellar where we were was about twenty by twenty feet, and blacker than a new shoe. There were two doors. One, on the opposite side, opened into the yard and was, I supposed, locked. I was lying on my back across the other, waiting for a pair of legs to grab. Zumwalt, with a gun out of which only one bullet had been spent, was somewhere in the blackness, and aware, from his silence, that I was still alive.

I figured I had the edge on him. I was closest to the only practicable exit; he didn't know that I was unarmed; he didn't know whether I had help close by or not. Time was valuable to him, but not necessarily so to me. So I waited.

Time passed. How much I don't know. Maybe half an hour.

The floor was damp and hard and thoroughly uncomfortable. The electric light had cut my hand when I broke it, and I couldn't determine how badly I was bleeding. I thought of Tad's "blind man in a dark room hunting for the black hat that wasn't there," and knew how he felt.

A box or barrel fell over with a crash — knocked over by Zumwalt, no doubt, moving out from his hiding-place.

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Silence for a while. And then I could hear him moving cautiously off to one side.

Without warning two streaks from his pistol sent bullets into the partition somewhere above my feet. I wasn't the only one who was feeling the strain.

Silence again, and I found that I was wet and dripping with perspiration. I could hear his breathing, but couldn't determine whether he was nearer or was breathing more heavily.

Then a soft, sliding, dragging across the dirt floor . . . I pictured him crawling awkwardly on his knees and one hand, the other hand holding the pistol out ahead of him — the pistol that would spit fire as soon as its muzzle touched something soft. And I became uneasily aware of my bulk. I am thick through the waist; and there in the dark it seemed to me that my paunch must extend almost to the ceiling — a target no bullet could miss.

I stretched my hands out toward him and held them there. If they touched him first I'd have a chance.

He was panting harshly now; and I was breathing through a mouth that was stretched as wide as it would go, so that there would be no rasping of the large quantities of air I was taking in and letting out.

Abruptly he came.

Hair brushed the fingers of my left hand. I closed them about it, pulling the head I couldn't see viciously toward me, driving my right fist beneath it. I put everything I had in that smack. It wasn't until later, when I found that one of my cheeks was scorched, that I realized his gun had gone off.

He wiggled, and I hit him again.

Then I was sitting astride him, my flashlight hunting for his pistol. I found it, and yanked him to his feet.

As soon as his head cleared I herded him into the front cellar and got a globe to replace the one I had smashed.

"Now dig it up," I ordered.

That was a safe way of putting it. I wasn't sure what I wanted or where it would be, except that his selecting this part of the cellar to wait for me in made it look as if this was the right place.

"You'll do your own digging!" he growled.

"Maybe," I said, "but I'm going to do it now, and I haven't time to tie you up. So if I've got to do the digging, I'm going to crown you first, so you'll sleep peacefully until it's all over."

All smeared with blood and dirt and sweat, I must have looked capable of anything, for when I took a step toward him and clenched my fist, he gave in.

From behind the lumber pile he brought a spade, moved some of the barrels to one side, and started turning up the dirt.

When a hand — a man's hand — dead-yellow where the damp dirt didn't stick to it — came into sight I stopped him.

I had found "it," and I had no

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stomach for looking at "it" after three weeks of lying in the wet ground. . . .

In court, Lester Zumwalt's plea was that he had killed his partner in self-defense. Zumwalt testified that he had taken the Gorham bonds in a futile attempt to recover losses in the stock market; and that when Rathbone — who had intended taking them and going to Central America with Mrs. Earnshaw — had visited the safe-deposit box and found them gone, he had returned to the office and charged Zumwalt with the theft.

At that time Zumwalt had not suspected his partner's own dishonest plans, and had promised to restore the bonds. They had gone to Zumwalt's house to discuss the matter; and Rathbone, dissatisfied with his partner's plan of restitution, had attacked Zumwalt, and had been killed in the ensuing struggle.

Then Zumwalt had told Mildred Narbett, his stenographer, the whole story and had persuaded her to help him. Between them they had made it appear that Rathbone had been in the office for a while the next day — the twenty-eighth — and had left for New York.

However, the jury seemed to think that Zumwalt had lured his partner out to the Fourteenth Avenue house for the purpose of killing him; so Zumwalt was found guilty of murder in the first degree.

The first jury before which Mildred Narbett was tried disagreed. The second jury acquitted her, holding that there was nothing to show that she had taken part in either the theft of the bonds or the murder, or that she had any knowledge of either crime until afterward; and that her later complicity was, in view of her love for Zumwalt, not altogether blameworthy.

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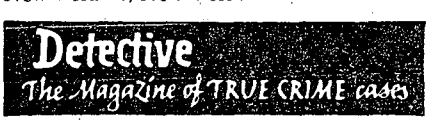

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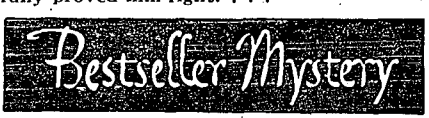

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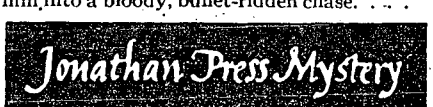

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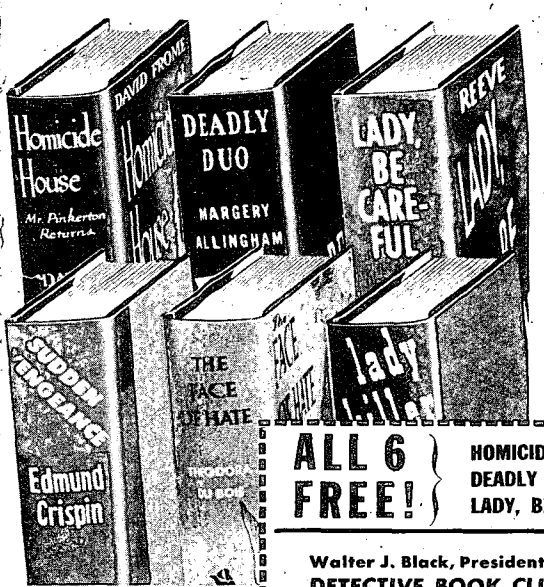

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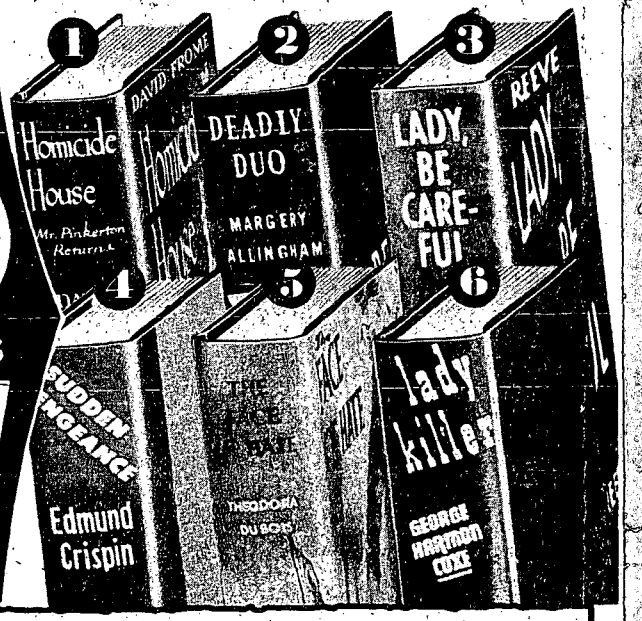

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